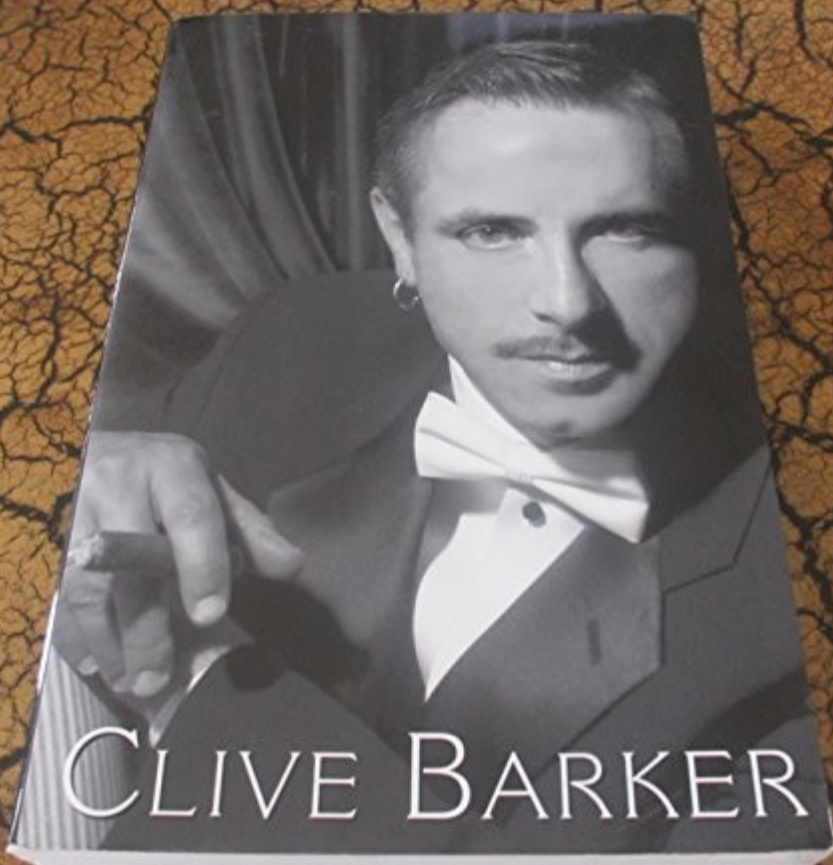


A black and white photograph of Clive Barker. He is wearing a dark tuxedo jacket over a white shirt and a white bow tie. He has a mustache and is looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. His right hand is raised, holding a cigar between his fingers. The background of the photo is dark and indistinct. The photo is set against a larger background of a brown, cracked, leather-like texture.

CLIVE BARKER

VISIT...

LANZAROTE
Caliente.COM

CLIVE
BARKER
COLDHEART
CANYON

A HOLLYWOOD GHOST STORY



Microsoft®



Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

Coldheart Canyon: A Hollywood Ghost Story

Copyright 2001 by Clive Barker

Scanned from an Advanced Readers Edition

For David Emilian Armstrong

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are a lot of people to thank for helping me bring this one home.
It

was a devil of a book to write, for a host of reasons. For one thing, I
began

writing it the week before my father passed away, and inevitably the
long shadow of

that event dimmed the joy of writing, at least for the first six months
or so,

slowing it to a crawl.

Paradoxically, even as my production of useable text diminished, I
could

feel the scale of the story I wanted to tell getting bigger. What had
originally

begun life as an idea for a short, satiric stab at Hollywood began to
blossom into

something larger, lush and stranger: a fantasia on Hollywood both
in its

not-so-innocent youth and in its present, wholly commercialized
phase, linked by a

sizeable cast and a mythology which I would need to create and
explain in very

considerable detail.

I don't doubt that this second incarnation of the book will be much more

satisfying a read than the firstówhich I had written almost in its entirety before

changing directionóbut Lord, it was a son of a bitch to get down onto the page.

Forgive me, then, if the list of people I'm thanking is longer than usual.

And believe me when I tell you every one of them deserves this nod of recognition,

because each has helped get Coldheart Canyon out of my head and into print.

Let me begin with the dedicatee of this book, David Emilian Armstrong, my

husband and in every sense of the word my partner: the one who was with me when one

of our five dogs, Charlie, passed away (Charlie's loving presence, and the sadness

and frustration of losing him, is recorded in this novel). David always has faith in

my capacity to go one step further: to make the tale I'm telling a little richer,

the picture I'm painting a little brighter, the photograph I'm taking a little

sexier.

My thanks to Craig Green and Don MacKay, to whom I first gave the handwritten pages to be typed; and most especially to David John

Doddsómy oldest and

dearest friendówho worked through much of the Christmas period
(with the Seraphim

offices deserted around us) polishing the text, then polishing the
polishes, so that

the immense manuscript would be ready to be dispatched to my
publishers before I

went to recuperate in Kauai.

To Bob Pescovitz, my researcher, and Angela Calin, my translator, my
thanks.

To Michael Hadley, Joe Daley and Renee Rosen, who run all the
various

aspects of my creative life outside writing and painting (films,
television, theme

park mazes and toy-lines, web-sites, photographs-and the endless
business of

promoting the above), my gratitude. In the last year and a half, I have
often been

an absentee boss, because I've been in the wilds of Coldheart Canyon.
During that

period, they have worked together to make our businesses prosper. Let
me not forget

Ana Osgood and Denny McLain, to whom fall the very considerable
responsibilities of

organizing and archiving my visual work, especially the many
enormous paintings for

my next books, The Abarat Quartet.

Then there are the two peopleóToya Castillo and Alex Rosasówho

make the

homes in which we work run smoothly. Who feed David and myself,
and wash our

clothes; who make sure there's shampoo in our shower and our dogs
smell sweet.

Again, I have been something of a phantom of myself for much of the
last year,

passing through the house on my way to write or paint with a
distracted look. They

kindly indulge my craziness, and my endless calls for cups of hot
sweet tea.

I also owe a great debt of gratitude to Dr Alex del Rosario, and his
assistant Judy Azar. I recently described Alex as the perfect 'artist's
doctor'. He

has guided me through some lengthy periods of sickness in the last
couple of years,

understanding as no other physician in my history has the fierce and
sometimes

self-wounding passion that makes artists attempt to do the impossible:
to paint

another world into being, while writing a two hundred thousand word
novel while

producing a couple of movies, for instance. For me, this is my natural,
albeit

Page 1

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

obsessive, behavior. But my body isn't that of a thirty-year-old any
longer (or even

that of a forty-year-old!). It complains now when I drive it hard; as I do daily. It

has taken a massive contribution of sympathetic counsel, medication and alternative

therapies to keep body and spirit together since my father's death and I owe Alex a

huge debt of thanks for my present good health.

Finally, the powers that be. First, my love and thanks to Ben Smith, my

Hollywood agent, who has been a true visionary in a job that is often maligned (in

this book, for instance) as being for cold, artistically disinterested men and

women. My thanks and great admiration go to the lawyer who has helped shape my

business life in the last two years, David Golden. The Abarat deal with the Disney

Company was the largest literary deal made in Hollywood last year, and it covers

every possible shape and permutation that my invented world might take, in the hands

of Disney's imagineers. To give you a taste of what kind of wordage David Golden has

minutely analyzed on my behalf: the Disney contract had three pages alone devoted to

listing its contents!

On the literary side, my dear Anne Sibbald, who has surely the tenderest

heart of any agent who ever represented an unreformed maker of
monsters like myself,

has been a constant source of encouragement, and a fearless champion
when

occasion the machinations of the corporate world proved painful and
incomprehensible.

And last but oh, you both know, never least my editors.

In New York, Robert Jones (who's had his own wars to fight of late,
and has

still always been there with a witty word of support; or some
wonderfully dry remark

at the expense of the many idiocies of the publishing world.)

And finally we come to Jane Johnson. My Jane, I insist, the Editor of
Editors, who is never far from my mind when I set pen to paper.
Increasingly, Jane,

I think I write to entertain you, to please you. We have survived for
many years

together on a raft of shared beliefs about the necessity of dreams,
tossed around in

the tumultuous seas of modern publishing. In that time, Jane has lost
countless

colleagues to exhaustion, frustration and despair, and yet she manages
to be a

mistress of beautiful prose as well as an editor of a stable of authors,
who, like

me, could not imagine their literary lives continuing without her.

I would have given up the increasingly problematic ambition of

having a

broad audience for my work, and fled into the minor, the hermetic
and the oblique,

without her tireless encouragement.

My love to you, my Jane; and, as always, my heartfelt thanks.

Here's another tale for you, saved from the flood.

CB

CONTENTS

PROLOGUE THE CANYON

PART ONE THE PRICE OF THE HUNT

PART TWO THE HEART-THROB

PART THREE A DARKER TIME

PART FOUR LIFE AFTER FAME

PART FIVE DESIRE

PART SIX THE DEVIL'S COUNTRY

PART SEVEN THE A-LIST

PART EIGHT THE WIND AT THE DOOR

PART NINE THE QUEEN OF HELL

PART TEN AND THE DEAD CAME IN

PART ELEVEN THE LAST CHASE

EPILOGUE AND SO, LOVE

PROLOGUE

THE CANYON

It is night in Coldheart Canyon, and the wind comes off the desert.

The Santa Anas, they call these winds. They blow off the Mojave, bringing

malaise, and the threat of fire. Some say they are named after Saint Anne, the

mother of Mary, others that they are named after one General Santa Ana, of the

Page 2

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

Mexican cavalry, a great creator of dusts; others still that the name is derived

from santanta, which means Devil Wind.

Whatever the truth of the matter, this much is certain: the Santa Anas are

always baking hot, and often so heavily laden with perfume that it's as though

they've picked up the scent of every blossom they've shaken on their way here. Every

wild lilac and wild rose, every white sage and rank jimsonweed, every heliotrope and

creosote bush: gathered them all up in their hot embrace and borne them into the

hidden channel of Coldheart Canyon.

There's no lack of blossoms here, of course. Indeed, the Canyon is almost

uncannily verdant. Some of the plants here were brought in from the

world outside by

these same burning winds, these Santa Anas; others were dropped in
the feces of the

wild animals who wander throughóthe deer and coyote and raccoon;
some spread from

the gardens of the great dream palace that lays solitary claim to this
corner of

Hollywood. Alien blooms, this last kindóorchids and lotus
flowersónurtured by

gardeners who have long since left off their pruning and their
watering, and

departed, allowing the bowers which they once treasured to run riot.

But for some reason there is always a certain bitterness in the blooms
here.

Even the hungry deer, driven from their traditional trails these days
by the

presence of sightseers who have come to see Tinseltown, do not linger
in the Canyon

for very long. Though the deer venture along the ridge and down the
steep slopes of

the Canyon, and curiosity, especially amongst the younger animals,
often leads them

over the rotted fences and toppled walls into the secret enclaves of the
gardens,

they seldom choose to stay there for very long.

Perhaps it isn't just that the leaves and petals are bitter. Perhaps there

are too many whisperings in the air around the ruined gazebos, and
the animals are

unnerved by what they hear. Perhaps there are too many presences
brushing against

their trembling flanks as they explore the clotted pathways. Perhaps,
as they graze

the overgrown lawns, they look up and mistake a statue for a pale
fragment of life,

and are startled by their error, and take flight.

Perhaps, sometimes, they are not mistaken.

Perhaps.

The Canyon is familiar with perhaps; with what may or may not be.
And never

more so than on such a night as this, when the winds come sighing off
the desert,

heavy with their perfume, and such souls as the Canyon hosts express
their longing

for something they dreamed they had, or dreamed that they dreamed,
their voices so

tenuous tonight that they're inaudible to the human ear, even if there
were someone

to hear them, which there never is.

That's not entirely true. On occasion somebody will be tenacious
enough to

find their way into this vale of luxury and tears; a tourist, perhaps
even a family

of tourists, foolishly determined to discover what lies off the
prescribed route;

looking for some famous heart-throb's love-nest, or a glimpse of the
idol himself,

caught unawares as he walks with his dog. There are even a few trespassers over the

years who have found their way here intentionally, guided to this place by hints

dropped in obscure accounts of Old Hollywood. They venture cautiously, these few.

Indeed there is often something close to reverence in the way they enter Coldheart

Canyon. But however these visitors arrive, they always leave the same way:

hurriedly, with many a nervous backward glance. Even the crassest of themóeven the

ones who'd claim they don't have a psychic bone in their bodiesóare discomfited by

something they sniff here. Their sixth sense, they have discovered, is far more

acute than they had thought. Only when they have outrun the all-too-eager shadows of

the Canyon and they are back in the glare of the billboards on Sunset Boulevard, do

they wipe their clammy palms, and wonder to themselves how it was that in such a

harmless spot they could have been so very afraid.

PART ONE

THE PRICE OF THE HUNT

ONE

"Your wife did not want to look around the Fortress any further, Mister

Zeffer?" Father Sandru said, seeing that on the second day the middle-aged man with

the handsome, sad face had come alone.

"The lady is not my wife," Zeffer explained.

Page 3

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"Ah..." the monk replied, the tone of commiseration in his voice indicating

that he was far from indifferent to Katya's charms. "A pity for you, yes?"

"Yes," Zeffer admitted, with some discomfort.

"She's a very beautiful woman."

The monk studied Zeffer's face as he spoke, but having said what he'd said,

Zeffer was unwilling to play the confessee any further.

"I'm her manager," he explained. "That's all there is between us."

Father Sandru, however, was not willing to let the issue go just yet.
After

the two of you departed yesterday," he said, his English colored by his native

Romanian, "one of the brothers remarked that she was the most lovely women he had

ever seen..." he hesitated before committing to the rest of the sentence
"...in the

flesh."

"Her name's Katya, by the way," Zeffer said.

"Yes, yes, I know," said the Father, his fingers combing the knotted gray-white of his beard as he stood assessing Zeffer.

The two men were a study in contrasts. Sandru ruddy-faced and rotund in his

dusty brown habit, Zeffer slimly elegant in his pale linen suit.

"She is a movie-star, yes?"

"You saw one of her films?"

Sandru grimaced, displaying a poorly-kept array of teeth. "No, no," he said.

"I do not see these things. At least not often. But there is a little cinema in

Ravbac, and some of the younger brothers go down there quite regularly. They are

great fans of Chaplin, of course. And there's a...vamp...is that the word?"

"Yes," Zeffer replied, somewhat amused by this conversation. "Vamp's the

word."

"Called Theda Bara."

"Oh, yes. We know Theda."

In that year which was 1920 everybody knew Theda Bara. She had one of the

most famous faces in the world. As, of course, did Katya. Both were famous; their

fame tinged with a delicious hint of decadence.

"I must go with one of the brothers when they next go to see her,"

Father

Sandru said.

"I wonder if you entirely understand what kind of woman Theda Bara portrays?" Zeffer replied.

Sandru raised a thicketed eyebrow. "I am not born yesterday, Mister Zeffer.

The Bible has its share of these women, these vamps. They're whores, yes; women of

Babylon? Men are drawn to them only to be destroyed by them?"

Zeffer laughed at the directness of Sandru's description. "I suppose that's

about right," he said.

"And in real life?" Sandru said.

"In real life Theda Bara's name is Theodesia Goodman. She was born in Ohio."

"But is she a destroyer of men?"

"In real life? No, I doubt it. I'm sure she harms a few egos now and again,

but that's about the worst of it."

Father Sandru looked mildly disappointed. "I shall tell the brothers what

you told me," he said. "They'll be very interested. Well then...shall I take you

inside?"

Matthias Zeffer was a cultured man. He had lived in Paris, Rome, London and

briefly in Cairo in his forty-three years; and had promised himself that he would

leave Los Angeles where there was neither art nor the ambition to make art as soon

as the public tired of lionizing Katya, and she tired of rejecting his offer of

marriage. They would wed, and come back to Europe; find a house with some real

history on its bones, instead of the fake Spanish mansion her fortune had allowed

her to have built in one of the Hollywood canyons.

Until then, he would have to find aesthetic comfort in the objets d'art he

purchased on their trips abroad: the furniture, the tapestries, the statuary. They

would suffice, until they could find a chateau in the Loire, or perhaps a Georgian

house in London; somewhere the cheap theatrics of Hollywood wouldn't curdle his

blood.

"You like Romania?" the Father asked as he unlocked the great oak door that

lay at the bottom of the stairs.

"Yes, of course," Zeffer replied.

"Please do not feel you have to sin on my account," Sandru said, with a

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

sideways glance.

"Sin?"

"Lying is a sin, Mister Zeffer. Perhaps it's just a little one, but it's a sin nevertheless."

Oh Lord, Zeffer thought; how far I've slipped from the simple proprieties!

Back in Los Angeles he sinned as a matter of course; every day, every hour. The life

he and Katya lived was built on a thousand stupid little lies.

But he wasn't in Hollywood now. So why lie? "You're right. I don't like this

country very much at all. I'm here because Katya wanted to come. Her mother and

fatheróI'm sorry, her stepfatherólive in the village."

"Yes. This I know. The mother is not a good woman."

"You're her priest?"

"No. We brothers do not minister to the people. The Order of St. Teodor

exists only to keep its eyes on the Fortress." He pushed the door open. A dank smell

exuded from the darkness ahead of them.

"Excuse me for asking," Zeffer said. "But it was my understanding from yesterday that apart from you and your brothers, there's nobody here."

"Yes, this is true. Nobody here, except the brothers."

"So what are you keeping your eyes on?"

Sandru smiled thinly. "I will show you," he said. "As much as you wish to see."

He switched on a light, which illuminated ten yards of corridor. A large

tapestry hung along the wall, the image upon it so grey with age and dust as to be

virtually beyond interpretation.

The Father proceeded down the corridor, turning on another light as he did

so. "I was hoping I might be able to persuade you to make a purchase," he said.

"Of what?" Zeffer said.

Zeffer wasn't encouraged by what he'd seen so far. A few of the pieces of

furniture he'd spotted yesterday had a measure of rustic charm, but nothing he could

imagine buying.

"I didn't realize you were selling the contents of the Fortress." Sandru

made a little groan. "Ah...I'm afraid to say we must sell in order to eat. And that

being the case, I would prefer that the finer things went to someone who will take

care of them, such as yourself."

Sandru walked on ahead a little way, turning on a third light and then a

fourth. This level of the Fortress, Zeffer was beginning to think, was bigger than

the floor above. Corridors ran of in all directions.

"But before I begin to show you," Sandru said, "you must tell meóare you in

a buying mood?"

Zeffer smiled. "Father, I'm an American. I'm always in a buying mood."

Sandru had given Katya and Zeffer a history of the Fortress the previous

day; though as Zeffer remembered it there was much in the account that had sounded

bogus. The Order of St. Teodor, Zeffer had decided, had something to hide. Sandru

had talked about the Fortress as a place steeped in secrets; but nothing

particularly bloody. There had been no battles fought there, he claimed, nor had its

keep ever held prisoners, nor its courtyard witnessed atrocity or execution. Katya,

in her usual forthright manner, had said that she didn't believe this to be true.

"When I was a little girl there were all kinds of stories about this place,"

she said. "I heard horrible things were done here. That it was human blood in the

mortar between the stones. The blood of children."

"I'm sure you must have been mistaken," the Father had said.

ìAbsolutely not. The Devil's wife lived in this fortress. Lilith, they

called her. And she sent the Duke away on a hunt. And he never came back."

Sandru laughed; and if it was a performance, then it was an exceptionally

good one. "Who told you these tales?" he said.

"My mother."

"Ah," Sandru had shaken his head. "And I'm sure she wanted you in bed,

hushed and asleep, before the Devils came to cut off your head." Katya had made no

reply to this. "There are still such stories, told to children. Of course. Always

stories. People invent tales. But believe me, this is not an unholy place. The

brothers would not be here if it was."

Despite Sandru's plausibility, there'd still been something about all of

this that had made Zeffer suspicious; and a little curious. Hence his return visit.

Page 5

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

If what the Father was saying was a lie (a sin, by his own definition), then what

purpose was it serving? What was the man protecting? Certainly not a few rooms

filled with filthy tapestries, or some crudely carved furniture. Was there something

here in the Fortress that deserved a closer look? And if so, how did he

get the

Father to admit to it?

The best route, he'd already decided, was fiscal. If Sandru was to be persuaded to reveal his true treasures, it would be through the scent of hard cash

in his nostrils. The fact that Sandru had raised the subject of buying and selling

made the matter easier to broach.

"I do know Katya would love to have something from her homeland to take back

to Hollywood," he said. "She's built a huge house, so we have plenty of room."

"Oh, yes?"

'And of course, she has the money."

This was naked, he knew, but in his experience of such things subtlety seldom played well. Which point was instantly proved.

"How much are we talking about?" the Father asked mildly.

"Katya Lupi is one of the best-paid actresses in Hollywood. And I am authorized to buy whatever I think might please her."

"Then let me ask you: what pleases her!"

"Things that nobody else would be likely to possess, please

her," Zeffer replied. "She likes to show off her collection, and she wants

everything in it to be unique."

Sandru spread his arms and his smile. "Everything here is unique."

"Father, you sound as though you're ready to sell the foundations if the

price is right."

Sandru waxed metaphysical. "All these things are just objects in the end.

Yes? Just stone and wood and thread and paint. Other things will be made in time, to

replace them."

"But surely there's some sacred value in the objects here?" The Father gave

a little shrug. "In the Chapel, upstairs, yes. I would not want to sell you, let us

say, the altar." He made a smile, as though to say that under the right

circumstances even that would have its price. "But everything else in the Fortress

was made for a secular purpose. For the pleasure of dukes and their ladies. And as

nobody sees it now...except a few travelers such as yourselves, passing through...I

don't see why the Order shouldn't be rid of it all. If there's sufficient profit to

be made it can be distributed amongst the poor."

"There are certainly plenty of people in need of help," Zeffer said. He had

been appalled at the primitive conditions in which many of the people in the

locality lived. The villages were little more than gatherings of shacks,
the rocky

earth the farmers tilled all but fruitless. And on all sides, the
mountainsóthe

Bucegi range to the east, to the west the Fagaras Mountainsótheir bare
lower slopes

as gray as the earth, their heights dusted with snow. God knew what
the winters were

like in this place: when even the dirt turned hard as stone, and the
little river

froze, and the walls of the shacks could not keep out the wind
whistling down from

the mountain heights.

The day they'd arrived, Katya had taken Willem to the cemetery, so
that she

could show him where her grandparents were buried. There he'd had
proof aplenty of

the conditions in which her relatives lived and died. It was not the
resting places

of the old that had moved Willem; it was the endless rows of tiny
crosses that

marked the graves of infants: babies lost to pneumonia, malnutrition
and simple

frailty. The grief that was represented by these hundreds of graves had
moved him

deeply: the pain of mothers, the unshed tears of fathers and
grandfathers. It was

nothing he had remotely expected, and it had made him sick with
sorrow.

For her part, Katya had seemed untouched by the sight, talking only of her

memories of her grandparents and their eccentricities. But then this was the world

in which she'd been raised; it wasn't so surprising, perhaps, that she took all this

suffering for granted. Hadn't she once told him she'd had fourteen brothers and

sisters, and only six of them were left living? Perhaps the other eight had been

lain to rest in the very cemetery where they'd walked together. And certainly it

would not be uncommon for Katya to look coldly on the business of the heart. It was

what made her so strong; and it was her strength visible in her eyes and in her

every movement that endeared her to her audiences, particularly the women.

Zeffer understood that coldness better now that he'd spent time here with

her. Seeing the house where she'd been born and brought up, the streets she'd

Page 6

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

trudged as a child; meeting the mother who must have viewed her appearance in their

midst as something close to a miracle: this perfect rosebud child whose dark eyes

and bright smile set her utterly apart from any other child in the village. In fact,

Katya's mother had put such beauty to profitable work at the age of twelve, when the

girl had been taken from town to town to dance in the streets, and at least

according to Katya offer her favors to men who'd pay to have such tender flesh in

their bed for the night. She had quickly fled such servitude, only to find that what

she'd had to do for her family's sake she had no choice but to do for herself. By

the age of fifteen (when Zeffer had met her, singing for her supper on the streets

of Bucharest) Katya had been a woman in all but years, her flowering an astonishment

to all who witnessed it. For three nights he'd come to the square where she sang,

there to join the group of admirers who were gathered around to watch this

child-enchanted. It hadn't taken him long to conceive of the notion that he should

bring her back with him to America. Though he'd had at that time no experience in

the world of the cinema (few people did; the year was 1916, and film was a

fledgling), his instincts told him there was something special in the face and

bearing of this creature. He had influential friends on the West

Coastómostly men

who'd grown tired of Broadway's petty disloyalties and piddling profits, and were

looking for a new place to put their talents and their investmentsówho reported to

him that cinema was a grand new frontier, and that talent scouts on the West Coast

were looking for faces that the camera, and the public, would love. Did this

child-woman not have such a face, he'd thought? Would the camera not grow stupid

with infatuation to look into those guileful yet lovely eyes? And if the camera

fell, could the public be far behind?

He'd inquired as to the girl's name. She was one Katya Lubescu from the

village of Ravbac. He approached her; spoke to her; told her, over a meal of cabbage

rolls and cheese, what he was thinking. She was curiously sanguine about his whole

proposal; practically indifferent. Yes, she conceded, it sounded interesting, but

she wasn't sure if she would ever want to leave Romania. If she went too far from

home, she would miss her family.

A year or two later, when her career had begun to take off in Americaóshe no

longer Katya Lupescu by then but Katya Lupi, and Willem her

manageróthey'd revisited

this very conversation, and Zeffer had reminded her how uninterested she'd seemed in

his grand plan. Her coolness had all been an illusion, she'd confessed; a way in

part to keep herself from seeming too gauche in his eyes, and in part a way to

prevent her hopes getting too high.

But that was only part of the answer. There was also a sense in which the

indifference she'd demonstrated that first day they'd met (andómore recentlyóin the

cemetery) was a real part of her nature; bred into her, perhaps, by a bloodline that

had suffered so much loss and anguish over the generations that nothing was allowed

to impress itself too severely: neither great happiness nor great sadness. She was,

by her own design, a creature who held her extremes in reserve, providing glimpses

only for public consumption. It was these glimpses that the audience in the square

had come to witness night after night. And it was this same power she would unleash

when she appeared before the cinematographic camera.

Interestingly, Katya had shown none of this quality to Father Sandru the

previous day.

In fact, it was almost as though she'd been playing a part: the role of a rather bland God-fearing girl in the presence of a beloved priest. Her gaze had been respectfully downcast much of the time, her voice softer than usual, her vocabulary which often tended to the salty-sweet and compliant.

Zeffer had found the performance almost comical, it was so exaggerated; but the Father had apparently been completely taken in by it. At one point he'd put his hand under Katya's chin to raise her face, telling her there was no reason to be shy.

Shy! Zeffer had thought. If only Sandru knew what this so-called shy woman was capable of! The parties she'd master-minded up in her Canyon—the gossip-columnists had dubbed Coldheart Canyon; the excesses she'd choreographed behind the walls of her compound; the sheer filth she was capable of inventing when the mood took her. If the mask she'd been wearing had slipped for a heartbeat, and the poor, deluded Father Sandru had glimpsed the facts of the matter, he would have locked himself in a cell and sealed the door with prayers and holy water to keep her out.

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

But Katya was too good an actress to let him see the truth.

Perhaps in one sense, Katya Lupi's whole life had now become a performance.

When she appeared on screen she played the role of simpering, abused orphans half

her age, and large portions of the audience seemed to believe that this was reality.

Meanwhile, every weekend or so, out of sight of the people who thought she was moral

perfection, she threw the sort of parties for the other idols of Hollywoodóthe vamps

and the clowns and the adventurersówhich would have horrified her fans had they

known what was going on. Which Katya Lupi was the real one? The weeping child who

was the idol of millions, or the Scarlet Woman who was the Mistress of Coldheart

Canyon? The orphan of the storm or the dope-fiend in her lair? Neither? Both?

Zeffer turned these thoughts over as Sandru took him from room to room,

showing him tables and chairs, carpets and paintings; even mantelpieces.

"Does anything catch your eye?" Sandru asked him eventually. "Not really,

Father," Zeffer replied, quite honestly. "I can get carpets as fine as

these in

America. I don't need to come out into the wilds of Romania to find work like this."

Sandru nodded. "Yes, of course," he said. He looked a little defeated.

Zeffer took the opportunity to glance at his watch. "Perhaps I should be getting

back to Katya," he said. In fact, the prospect of returning to the village and

sitting in the little house where Katya had been born, there to be plied with thick

coffee and sickeningly sweet cake, while Katya's relatives came by to stare at (and

touch, as if in disbelief) their American visitors, did not enthrall him at all. But

this visit with Father Sandru was becoming increasingly futile, and now that the

Father had made his mercenary ambitions so plain, not a little embarrassing. There

wasn't anything here that Zeffer could imagine transporting back to Los Angeles.

He reached into his coat to take out his wallet, intending to give the

Father a hundred dollars for his troubles. But before he could produce the note, the

Father's expression changed to one of profound seriousness.

"Wait," he said. "Before you dismiss me let me say this: I believe we

understand one another. You are looking to buy something you could find in no other

place. Something that's one of a kind, yes? And I am looking to make a sale."

"So is there something here you haven't shown me?" Zeffer said.
"Something

special?"

Sandru nodded. "There are some parts of the Fortress I have not shared with

you," he said. "And with good reason, let me say. You see there are people who

should not see what I have to show. But I think I understand you now, Mister Zeffer.

You are a man of the world."

"You make it all sound very mysterious," Zeffer said.

"I don't know if it's mysterious," the priest said. "It is sad, I think, and human. You see, Duke Goga the man who built this Fortressówas not a good soul. The

stories your Katya said she had been told as a childó"

"Were true?"

"In a manner of speaking. Goga was a great hunter. But he did not always

limit his quarry to animals."

"Good God. So she was right to be afraid."

"The truth is, we are all a little afraid of what happened here," Sandru

replied, "Because we are none of us certain of the truth. All we can do, young and

old, is say our prayers, and put our souls into God's care when we're in

this

place."

Zeffer was intrigued now.

"Tell me then," he said to Sandru. "I want to know what went on in this

place."

"Believe me please when I tell you I would not know where to begin," the

good man replied. "I do not have the words."

"Truly?"

"Truly."

Zeffer studied him with new eyes; with a kind of envy. Surely it was a

blessed state, to be unable to find words for the terribleness of certain deeds. To

be mute when it came to atrocity, instead of gabbily familiar with it. He found his

curiosity similarly muted. It seemed distastefulónot to mention pointlessóto press

the man to say more than he expressed himself capable of saying.

"Let's change the subject. Show me something utterly out of the ordinary,"

Zeffer said. "Then I'll be satisfied."

Sandru put on a smile, but it wasn't convincing. "It isn't much," he said.

"Oh sometimes you find beauty in the strangest places," Zeffer said, and as

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

he spoke the little face of Katya Lupescu came into his mind's eye;
pale in a blue

twilight.

TWO

Sandru led the way down the passageway to another door, this one
rather

smaller than the oak door they'd come through to get to this level. Out
came his

keys. He unlocked the door, and to Zeffer's surprise he and the priest
were

presented with another flight of steps, taking them yet deeper into the
Fortress.

"Are you ready?" the Father asked.

"Absolutely," Zeffer said.

Down they went. The stairs were steep, the air becoming noticeably
more

frigid as they descended. Father Sandru said nothing as they went; he
glanced back

over his shoulder two or three times, to be sure that he still had Zeffer
on his

heels, but the expression on his face was far from happy, as though he
rather

regretted making the decision to bring Zeffer here, and would have
turned on his

heel and headed back up to the relative comfort of the floor above at

the least

invitation.

At the bottom of the stairs he stopped, and rubbed his hands together vigorously.

"I think before we proceed any further we should take a glass of something

to warm us," he said. "What do you say?"

"I wouldn't say no," Zeffer said.

The Father went to a small cubby-hole in the wall a few yards from the

bottom of the stairs, from which he brought a bottle of spirits and two glasses.

Zeffer didn't remark on the liquor's proximity; nor could he blame the brothers for

needing a glass of brandy to fortify them when they came down here. Though the lower

level was supplied with electricity (there were 19 lengths of electric lamps looped

along the walls of the corridor) the light did nothing to warm the air nor comfort

the spirit.

Father Sandru handed Zeffer a glass, and took the cork out of the bottle.

The pop echoed off the naked stone of walls and floor. He poured Zeffer a healthy

measure of the liquor, and then an even healthier measure for himself, which he had

downed before Zeffer had got his own glass to his lips.

"When I first came here," the Father said, refilling his glass, "we used to

brew our own brandy, from plums we grew on our own trees."

"But not now?"

"No," the Father said, plainly saddened at the fact that they were no longer

producers of liquor. "The earth is not good any longer, so the plums never ripen

properly. They remain small and sour. The brandy made from such fruit is bitter, and

nobody wants to drink it. Even I will not drink it, so you can judge for yourself

how bad it must be!" He laughed at his self-deprecation, and used the laughter as a

cue to fill his glass up again. "Drink," he said to Zeffer, tapping his glass

against Zeffer's glass as though this was the first he'd had.

Zeffer drank. The brandy was stronger than the stuff he'd had at the hotel

in Brascov. It went down smoothly, warming his belly when it arrived.

"Good, yes?" the Father said, having downed his second glass.

"Very."

"You should have another before we go on." And he filled Zeffer's glass

without waiting for a reply. "We're a long way below ground here, and it gets

hellishly cold..." Glasses were filled, and emptied. The Father's mood was

noticeably better now, and his tone chattier. He put the glasses and the bottle back

in the hole in the wall, and then led the way down the narrow corridor, talking as

he went. "When the Order first came to the Fortress, there were plans to found a

hospital here. You see, there are no hospitals within a hundred and twenty miles of

here. It would be very practical. But this is not a place for the sick. And

certainly not the dying."

"So, no hospital?"

"Well, we made preparations. You saw yesterday one of the wardsó" Zeffer

remembered. He'd glanced through an open door and there'd been two rows of iron

beds, with bare mattresses. "I thought it was a dormitory for the brothers." "No. We

each have our own cells. There are only eleven of us, so we can each have a place in

which to meditate and pray..." He offered Zeffer a glance, accompanied by a small

smile. "And drink."

Page 9

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"I can't imagine it's a very satisfying life," Zeffer said.

"Satisfying?" The idea was obviously a little confounding to Sandru.

"Meaning what?"

"Oh, just that you don't get to work in the community. You can't help people."

They had come to the end of the passageway, and Sandru sorted through his

collection of keys in order to open the third and final door.

"Who can truly be helped?" he said, his face turned down to the labor of

sorting. "I suppose perhaps children can be comforted, sometimes, if it's dark and

they're afraid. You can tell them you're with them; and that will sometimes stop

them crying. But for the rest of us? Are there really any words that help? I don't

know of any." He had found the right key, and now slipped it noisily into the

antiquated lock. As he did so, he glanced up at Zeffer. "I think there's more

comfort to be had from seeing beautiful women on the cinema screen than in any

prayer I know. Well, perhaps not comfort. Distraction." He turned the key in the

lock. "And if that sounds like heresy, well so be it."

Sandru pushed the door open. The room was in darkness, but despite that fact

there was a warmth in the air; at least in contrast to the chilly air of the

passageway. Perhaps the difference was no more than two or three degrees, but it

felt significant.

"Will you wait here a moment?" Sandru said. "I'll just bring a light."

Zeffer stayed where he was, staring into the darkness, enjoying the slight rise in

temperature. There was enough illumination spilling from the passageway behind him

to light the threshold. There, carved into stone beneath his feet, was a curious

inscription:

Quamquam in fundis inferiorum sumus, oculos angelorum tenebimus.

He didn't linger to puzzle over this for more than a few seconds, but

instead let his eyes drift up and into the room itself. The chamber before him was

large, it seemed; and unlike the rest of the rooms and corridors, which were simply

constructed, far more elaborate. Could he make out pillars, supporting several small

vaults? He thought so. There were chairs and tables within a few yards of where he

stood, and what appeared to be lamps or the like heaped on top of them.

The confusion inside was explained a moment later, when the Father returned

with one of the bare bulbs, attached to a length of electric cord.

"We use this as a storeroom," he said. "Many of the items we found in the

Fortress when we arrived we put down here, just to get them out of the way." He

lifted the light to give Zeffer a better view.

Zeffer's estimation of the size of the place, and of the complexity of its

construction, had been conservative, it now turned out. The chamber was fully

thirty-five feet long; and almost as broad, the ceiling (which was indeed divided

into eight elaborately-vaulted sections, divided by pillars) higher than the

passageway by six feet or more. The floor was littered with furniture and crates;

the place plainly filled by hands that had little or no respect for the objects they

were moving; wishing only to put them quickly out of sight. It occurred to Zeffer

that if indeed there were treasures here the chances of finding themóor indeed of

their being in reasonable condition when discoveredówere remote. Still, the Father

had brought him this far at no little inconvenience to himself; it would be

discourteous to now show no interest in what the chamber contained.

"Did you have a part in moving all of this?" he asked Sandru, more out of a

need to fill the silence between them than because he was genuinely curious.

"Yes, I did," the Father replied. "Thirty-two years ago. I was a much younger man. But it was still a back-breaking labor. They built things big here. I

remember thinking that maybe the stories were right..."

"Stories aboutó"

"Oh...nonsenses. About this furniture having been built for the retinue of

the Devil's wife."

"The Devil's wife."

"Lilith, or Lilitu. Sometimes called Queen of Zemargad. Don't ask me why."

"This is the same woman Katya spoke about?"

Sandru nodded. "That's why the locals don't have much hope for the sick if

they stay here. They think Lilith's curse is on the place. As I say: nonsenses."

Whether it was nonsense or not, the story lent some flavor to this banal

adventure. "May I look more closely?" Zeffer asked.

Page 10

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"That's what we're here for," Father Sandru replied. "I hope there's

something that catches your eye, for your sake. All these stairs and doors. I'd

forgotten how far down it was..."

"I'm sorry to have made this so burdensome," Zeffer said, quite sincerely.

"If I'd known you were going to go to so much trouble I wouldn't haveó"

"No, no," Sandru said. "It's not a trouble to me. I only thought there might

be an item here that pleased you. But now I'm down here I doubt it. To be truthful I

believe we should have taken all this trash up the mountain and thrown it in the

deepest gorge we could find."

"Why didn't you do just that?"

"It wasn't my choice. I was just a young priest at the time. I did as I was

told. I moved tables and chairs and tapestries, and I kept my counsel. Our leader

then was Father Nicholas, who was very clear on the best thing to be doneóthe safest

thing for our soulsóand would not be moved on the subject. So we did as we were

told. Father Nicholas, by the way, had the foulest temper of any man I ever knew. We

all lived in fear of him."

Zeffer moved into the room, talking as he went: "May I say something that I

hope won't offend you?"

"I'm not easily offended, don't worry."

"Well...it's just that the more I hear about your Order, the less like priests you seem to be. Father Nicholas's temper and the brothers all familiar with

Theda Bara. And then the brandy."

"Ah, the sins of the flesh," Father Sandru said. "We do seem to have more

than our share, don't we?"

"I have offended you."

"No. You've simply seen the truth. And how can a man of God be justly

offended by that? What you've observed is no coincidence. We are all...how shall I

put this?...men who have more than our share of flaws. Some of us were never trusted

with a flock. Others, like Father Nicholas, were. But the arrangement was never

deemed satisfactory."

"His temper?"

"I believe he threw a Bible at one of the parishioners who was sleeping through the good Father's sermon." Zeffer chuckled; but his laughter was silenced a

moment later. "It killed the man."

"Killedó?"

"An accident, but still..."

"Ówith a Bible. Surely not."

"Well, that's how the rumor went. Father Nicholas has been dead twenty

years, so there's no way to prove it or disprove it. Let's hope it isn't true, and

if it is, hope he's at peace with it now. The fact is, I'm glad I was never trusted

with a parish. With a flock to tend. I couldn't have done much for them."

"Why not?" Zeffer asked, a little impatient with Sandru's melancholy now.

"Do you have difficulty finding God in a place like this?"

"To be honest Mr. Zeffer, with every week that passesÓI almost want to say

with every hourÓI find it harder to see a sign of God anywhere. It would not be

unreasonable, I think, to ask Him to show himself in beauty. In the face of your

lady-companion, perhaps...?"

Katya's face as proof of God's presence? It was an unlikely piece of metaphysics, Zeffer thought.

"I apologize," Sandru said. "You didn't come here to hear me talk about my

lack of faith."

"I don't mind."

"Well I do. The brandy makes me maudlin."

"Shall I take a look then?" Zeffer suggested, "At whatever's in here?"

"Yes, why don't we?" Sandru replied. "I wish I could give you some kind of

guidance, but..." He shrugged; his favorite gesture. "Why don't you start looking,

and I'll go back and get us something more to drink?"

"Nothing more for me," Zeffer replied.

"Well, then for me," Sandru said. "I'll only be a moment. If you need me,

just call. I'll hear you."

Zeffer took a moment, when the man was gone, to close his eyes and let his

thoughts grow a little more orderly. Though Sandru spoke slowly enough, there was

something mildly chaotic about his thought processes. One minute he was talking

Page 11

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

about furniture, the next about the mad Duke and his hunter's habits, the next about

the fact that they couldn't make a hospital here because the Devil's wife had cursed

the place.

When he opened his eyes his gaze moved back and forth over the furniture and

the boxes without lingering on anything in particular. The bare bulbs were stark, of

course, and their lights far from flattering, but even taking that fact into account

there was nothing in the room that caught Zeffer's eye. There were some

finely-wrought things, no question; but nothing extraordinary.

And then, as he stood there, waiting for Sandru to return, his gaze moved

beyond the objects that filled the chamber, and came to rest instead on the walls

beyond.

The chamber was not, he saw, made of bare stone. It was covered with tile.

In every sense, this was an understatement, for these were no ordinary tiles. Even

by so ungenerous a light as the bare bulbs threw upon them, and viewed by Zeffer's

weary eyes, it was clear they were of incredible sophistication and beauty.

He didn't wait for Father Sandru to return; rather, he began to push through

the piles of furniture towards the designs that covered the walls. They covered the

floor, too, he saw, and ceiling. In fact, the chamber was a single masterpiece of

tile; every single inch of it decorated.

In all his years of traveling and collecting he'd never seen anything quite

like this. Careless of the dirt and dust laden webs which covered every

surface, he

pushed on through until he reached the nearest wall. It was filthy, of course, but

he pulled a large silk handkerchief out of his pocket, and used it to scrub away

some of the filth on the tile. It had been plain even from a distance that the tiles

were elaborately designed, but now, as he cleared a swathe across four or five, he

realized that this was not an abstract pattern but a representation. There was part

of a tree there, on one of the tiles, and on another, adjacent to it, a man on a

white horse. The detail was astonishing. The horse was so finely painted, it looked

about ready to prance off around the room.

"It's a hunt."

Sandru's voice startled him; Willem jerked back from the wall, so suddenly

that it was as though he'd had his face in a vacuum, and was pulling it free. He

felt a drop of moisture plucked from the rim of his eye; saw it flying towards the

cleaned tile, defying gravity as it broke on the flank of the painted horse.

It was a strange moment; an illusion surely. It took him a little time to

shake off the oddness of it. When he looked round at Sandru, the man was slightly

out of focus. He stared at the Father's shape until his eyes corrected the problem.

When they did he saw that Sandru had the brandy bottle back in his hand. Apparently

its contents had been more potent than Zeffer had thought. The alcohol, along with

the intensity of his stare, had left him feeling strangely dislocated; as though the

world he'd been looking at the painted man on his painted horse, riding past a

painted tree was more real than the old priest standing there in the doorway.

"A hunt?" he asked at last. "What kind of hunt?"

"Oh, every kind," Sandru replied. "Pigs, dragons, women"

"Women?"

Sandru laughed. "Yes, women," he said, pointing towards a piece of the wall

some yards deeper into the chamber. "Go look," he said. "You'll find the whole thing

is filled with obscenities. The men who painted this place must have had some

strange dreams, let me tell you, if this is what they saw."

Zeffer pushed aside a small table, and then pressed himself between the wall

and a much larger piece of furniture, which looked like a wooden catafalque, too

large to move. Obligated to slide along the wall, his jacket did the job his

handkerchief had done moments before. Dust rose up in his face.

"Where now?" he asked the Father when he'd got to the other side of the

catafalque.

"A little further," Sandru replied, uncorking the brandy and shamelessly

taking a swig from the bottle.

"I need some more light back here," Zeffer said.

Reluctantly, Sandru went to pick up the lamp. It was hot now. He rummaged in

one of the nearby boxes to find something to protect his palm, found a length of

cloth and wrapped it around the base of the lamp. Then he tugged on the light-cord,

to give himself some more play, and made his way through the confusion of stuff in

the room, to where Zeffer was standing.

The closer Sandru came with the light the more Zeffer could make out of the

Page 12

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

painting on the tiles. There was a vast panorama spread to left and right of him;

and up above his head; and down to the ground, spreading beneath his feet. Though

the walls were so filthy that in places the design was entirely obliterated, and in

other places there were large cracks in the tiles, the image had an extraordinary

reality all of its own.

"Closer," Zeffer said to Sandru, sacrificing the arm of his fur coat to

clean a great portion of tiled wall in front of him. Each tile was about six inches

square, perhaps a little smaller, and set close to one another with a minimum of

grouting, so as to preserve the continuity of the picture. Despite the sickly right

off the bulb, its luminescence still showed that the color of the image had not been

diminished by time. The beauty of the renderings was perfectly evident. There were a

dozen kinds of green in the trees, and more, sweeter hues in the growth between

them. Beneath the canopy there were burnt umbers and siennas and sepias in the

trunks and branches, skillfully highlighted to lend the impression that light was

falling through the foliage and catching the bark. Not all the tiles were rendered

with the same expertise, he saw.

Some of the tiles were the work of highly sophisticated artists; some the

work of journeyman; someóespecially those that were devoted to areas of pure

foliageóthe handiwork of apprentices, working on their craft by filling

in areas

that their masters neither had the time nor perhaps the interest to address.

But none of this spoiled the power of the overall vision. In fact the

discontinuity of styles created a splendid energy in the piece. Portions of the

world were in focus, other parts were barely coherent; the abstract and the

representational sitting side by side on the wall, all part of one enormous story.

And what was that story? Plainly, given the kind of quarry Sandru had

listed, this was more than simply a hunt: it smacked of something far more

ambitious. But what? He peered at the tiles, his nose a few inches from the wall,

trying to make sense of what he was seeing.

"I looked at the whole room, before we put all the furniture in here,"

Sandru said. "It's a view, from the Fortress Tower."

"But not realistic?"

"It depends what you mean by realistic," Sandru said. "If you look over the

other side" he pointed across the room "óyou can see the delta of the Danube."

Zeffer could just make out the body of water, glittering in the gloom: and closer by

a mass of swampy land, with dozens of inlets winding through it, on their way to the

sea. "And there!" Sandru went on, "to the left" again, Zeffer followed Sandru's

finger "to the corner of the room, that rock"

"I see it."

The rock was tall, rising out of the ocean of trees like a tower, shrubs springing from its flank.

"That's called the May Rock," Sandru said. "The villagers dance there, on

the first six nights of May. Couples would stay there overnight, and try to make

children. It's said the women always became pregnant if they stayed with their men

on May Rock."

"So it exists? In the world, I mean. Out there."

"Yes, it's right outside the Fortress."

"And so all those other details? The delta"

"Is nine miles away, in that direction." Sandru pointed at the wall upon

which the Danube's delta was painted.

Zeffer smiled as he grasped what the artists had achieved here. Down in the

depths of the Fortress, at its lowest point, they had recreated in tile and paint

what could be seen from its pinnacle.

And with that realization came sense of the inscription he'd read on the

threshold.

Though we are in the bowels of Hell, we shall have the eyes of Angels.
This

room was the bowels of Hell. But the tile-makers and their artist
masters, wherever

they'd been, had created an experience that gave the occupants of this
dungeon the

eyes of angels. A paradoxical ambition, when all you had to do was
climb the stairs

and see all this from the top of the tower. But artists were often driven
by such

ambition; a need perhaps, to prove that it could even be done.

"Somebody worked very hard to create all this," Zeffer said. "Oh
indeed.

It's an impressive achievement."

"But you hide it away," Zeffer said, not comprehending the way the
room had

been treated. "You fill the place with old furniture and let it get filthy."

Page 13

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"Who could we show it to?" the Father replied. "It's too disgusting..."

"I see nothingó" he was about to say disgusting, when his eye alighted
on a

part of tile-work that he'd cleaned with his arm but had not closely
studied. In a

large grove a round stadium had been set up, with seating made of
wood. The

perspective was off (and the solution to the perspective changed subtly from tile to

tile, as various hands had contributed their piece of the puzzle. There were perhaps

twenty tiles that had some portion of the stadium represented upon them; the work of

perhaps five artists). The steep benches were filled with people, their bustle

evoked with quick, contentious strokes. Some people seemed to be standing; some

sitting. Two more groups of spectators were approaching the stadium from the

outside, though there was no room for them inside.

But what drew Zeffer's eye, and made him realize that the Father had been

right to wonder aloud who he might show this master-work to, was the event these

spectators had assembled to witness. It was an arena of sexual sport. Several

performances were going on at the same time, all unapologetically obscene. In one

section of the arena a naked woman was being held down while a creature twice her

size, his body bestial, his erection monstrous, was being roped back by four men who

appeared to be controlling his approach to the woman. In another quarter, a man had

been stripped of his skin by three naked women. A fourth straddled him as he lay on

the ground in his own blood. The other three wore pieces of his skin. One had on his

whole face and shoulders, her breasts sticking out from beneath the ragged hood.

Another sat on the ground, wearing his arms and pulling on the skin of his legs like

waders. The third, the queen of this quartet, was wearing what was presumably the

piece de resistance, the flesh which the unhappy owner had worn from mid breast-bone

to mid-thigh. She was cavorting in this garish costume like a dancer and, by some

magic known only to the maker of the mystery, the usurped skin still boasted a full

erection.

"Good God..." Zeffer said.

"I told you," Sandru said, just a little smugly. "And that's the least of it, believe me."

"The least of it?"

"The more you look, the more you see."

"Anywhere in particular?"

"Go over to the Wild Wood. Look amongst the trees."

Zeffer moved along the wall, studying the tiles as he went. At first he

couldn't make out anything controversial, but Sandru had some useful advice.

"Step away a foot or so."

In his fascination with the details of the stadium, Zeffer had come too close to the wall to see the wood for the trees. Now he stepped back and to his astonishment saw that the thicket around the arena was alive with figures, all of which were in some form or other monstrous; and all unequivocally sexual. Erections were thrust between the trees like plum-headed branches, women dangled from overhead with their legs spread (a flock of birds, thirty or more, swooped out of the sex of one; another was menstruating light, which was splashing on the ground below the tree. Snakes came out of the scarlet pool, in bright profusion).

"Is it like this all over?" Zeffer said, his astonishment unfeigned.

"All over. There are thirty-three thousand, two hundred and sixty-eight tiles, and there is obscene matter on two thousand, seven hundred and ninety-eight of them."

"You've obviously made a study," Zeffer observed.

"Not I. An Englishman who worked with Father Nicholas did the counting. For some reason the numbers remained in my head. I think it's old age. Things you want to remember, you can't. And things that don't mean anything stick in your head like

a knife."

"That's not a pretty image, with respect."

"With respect, there's nothing pretty about the way I feel," Sandru replied.

"I feel old to my marrow. On a good day I can barely get up in the morning. On a bad

day, I just wish I were dead."

"Lord."

Sandru shrugged. "That's what living in this place does to you after a while. Everything drains out of you somehow."

Zeffer was only half-listening. He was exhilarated by what he saw, and he

had no patience with Sandru's melancholy; his thoughts were with the walls, and the

pictures on the walls.

Page 14

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

Are there records documenting how this was created? It is a masterpiece, in

its way."

"One of a kind," Sandru said.

"Absolutely one of a kind."

"To answer your question, no, there are no records. It's assumed that it was

funded by Duke Goga, who had lately returned from the Crusades

with a large amount

of booty, claimed from the infidel in the name of Christ."

"But to build a room like this with money you'd made on the Crusades!"

Zeffer said incredulously.

"I agree. It seems like an unlikely thing to do in the name of God. Of

course none of this is proved. There are some people who will tell you that Goga

went missing on one of his hunts, and it wasn't him who built this place at all."

"Who then?"

"Lilith, the Devil's wife," the Father said, dropping his voice to a

whisper. "Which would make this the Devil's Country, no?"

"Has anybody tried to analyze the work?"

"Oh yes. The Englishman I spoke of, George Soames, claimed he had discovered

evidence of twenty-two different styles amongst the designs. But that was just the

painters. Then there were the men who actually made the tiles. Fired them. Sorted

out the good from the bad. Prepared the paint. Cleaned the brushes. And there must

have been some system to align everything."

"The rows of tiles?"

"I was thinking more of the alignment of interior with the exterior."

"Perhaps they built the room first."

"No. The Fortress is two-and-a-half centuries older than this room."

"My God, so to get the alignment so perfectó?"

"Is quite miraculous. Soames found fifty-nine geographical markersó certain

stones, trees, the spire of the old abbey in Darscusówhich are visible from the

tower and are also painted on the wall. He calculated that all fifty-nine were

correctly aligned, within half a degree of accuracy."

"Somebody was obsessive."

"Or else, divinely inspired."

"You believe that?"

"Why not?"

Zeffer glanced back at the arena on the wall behind him, with all its

libidinous excesses. "Does that look like the kind of work that somebody would do in

the name of God?"

As I said," Sandru replied, "I no longer know where God is and where He

isn't."

There was a long silence, during which Zeffer continued to survey the walls.

Finally he said: "How much do you want for it?"

"How much do I want for what?"

"For the room?"

Sandru barked out a laugh.

"I mean it," Zeffer said. "How much do you want for it?"

"It's a room, Mr. Zeffer," Sandru said. "You can't buy a room."

"Then it's not for sale?"

"That's not my pointó"

"Just tell me: is it for sale or not?"

Again, laughter. But this time there was less humor; more bemusement. "I

don't see that it's worth talking about," Sandru said, putting the brandy bottle to

his lips and drinking.

"Let's say a hundred thousand dollars. What would that be in lei? What's the

lei worth right now? A hundred and thirty-two-and-a-half to the dollar?"

"If you say so."

"So that's what? Thirteen million, two hundred and fifty thousand lei."

"You jest."

"No."

"Where would you find such money?" A pause followed. "If I may ask?"

"Over the years, I've made some very lucrative investments on behalf of

Katya. We own large parts of Los Angeles. Half a mile of Sunset

Boulevard is in her

name. Another half mile in mine."

"And you would sell all that to own this?"

"A little piece of Sunset Boulevard for your glorious Hunt? Why not?"

Page 15

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"Because it's just a room covered with filthy tile."

"So I have more money than sense. What does it matter to you? A hundred

thousand dollars is a great deal of money."

"Yes, it is."

"So, do we have a deal or not?"

"Mr. Zeffer, this is all too sudden. We're not talking about a chair here.

This is part of the fabric of the Fortress. It has great historical significance."

"A minute ago it was just a room covered with filthy tile."

"Filthy tile of great historical significance," Sandru said, allowing himself a little smile.

"Are you saying we can't find some terms that are mutually satisfying?

Because if you are"

"No, no, no. I'm not saying that. Perhaps we could eventually agree on a

price, if we talked about it for a while. But how would you ever get it back to

California?"

"That would be my problem. This is the twenties, Father. Anything's possible."

And then what? Suppose you could get everything back to Hollywood?"

Another room, the same proportionsó"

"You have such a room?"

"No. I'd build one. We have a house in the Hollywood Hills. I'd put it in as

a surprise for Katya."

"Without telling her?"

"Well if I told her it wouldn't be a surprise."

"I'm just astonished that she would allow you to do such a thing. A woman

like that."

"Like what?"

The question caught Sandru off-balance. "Well...so..."

"Beautiful?"

"Yes."

"I think our conversation's come full-circle, Father."

Sandru conceded the point with a little nod, lifting the brandy bottle as he

did so.

"So she's not as perfect as her face would suggest?" he asked at last.

"Not

remotely. Thank God."

"This place, with all its obscenities, would please her?" "Yes, I think it would. Why? Does that make you more open to the idea of selling it to me?"

"I don't know," Sandru replied, frowning. "This whole conversation hasn't

turned out the way I thought it would. I expected you to come down here and maybe

buy a table, or a tapestry. Instead you want to buy the walls!" He shook his head

again. "I was warned about you Americans," he added, his tone no longer amused.

"What were you warned about?"

"Oh, that you thought nothing was beyond your grasp. Or beyond your pocket."

"So the money isn't enough."

"The money, the money." He made an ugly sound in the back of his throat.

"What does the money matter? You want to pay a hundred thousand dollars for it? Pay

it. I'll never see a lei so why should I care what it costs you? You can steal it as

far as I am concerned."

"Let me understand you clearly. Are you agreeing to the sale?"

"Yes," Father Sandru said, his tone weary now, as though the whole subject

had suddenly lost all trace of pleasure for him. "I'm agreeing." "Good. I'm

delighted."

Zeffer returned through the maze of furniture to the door, where the priest

stood. He extended his hand. "It's been wonderful dealing with you, Father Sandru."

Sandru looked down on the proffered hand, and then after a moment of

study took it. His fingers were cold, his palm clammy. "Do you want to stay and look

at what you've bought?"

"No. I don't think so. I think we both need a little sun on our faces."

Sandru said nothing to this; he just turned and led the way out along the corridor

to the stairs. But the expression on his face, as he turned, was perfectly clear:

there was no more pleasure to be found above as there was down here in the cold; nor

prospect of any.

Page 16

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

THREE

There were ten thousand things Zeffer had not witnessed, or even glimpsed,

in his brief visit to the vast, mysterious chambers in the Fortress's bowels; images

haunting the tiles which he would not discern until the heroic labor of removing the

masterwork from the walls and shipping it to California was complete.

He was a literate man; better educated than most of his peers in the

burgeoning city of Los Angeles, thanks to parents who had filled the house with

books, even though there was often precious little food on the table. He knew his

classics, and the mythologies from which the great books and plays of the ancients

had been derived. In time he would discover dozens of images inspired by those same

myths on the tiles. In one place women were depicted like the Maenads immortalized

by Euripides; maddened souls in service of the god of ecstasies, Dionysus. They

raced through the trees with bloody hands, leaving pieces of male flesh scattered in

the grass. In another place, single-breasted Amazons strode, drawing their mighty

bows back and letting fly storms of arrows.

There were other imagesómany, many others-that were not rooted in any

recognizable mythology. In one spot, not far from the delta, huge fishes, which had

sprouted legs covered with golden scales, came through the trees in solemn shoals,

spitting fire. The trees ahead of them were aflame; burning birds rose

up from the

canopy.

In the swamp, a small town stood on long limbs, its presence appearing to

mark the position of some place that had existed there once but had been taken by

time, or a prophecy of some settlement to come. The artists had taken liberties with

the rendering, foreshortening the scene so that the occupants of the city were

almost as big as their houses, and could be plainly seen. There were excesses here,

too; perversities just as profound as anything the Wild Wood was hosting. Through

one of the windows a man could be seen spread-eagled on a table, around which sat a

number of guests, all watching a large worm enter him anally and then erupt from his

open mouth. Another was the scene of a strange summoning, in which a host of black

birds with human heads rose up from the ground, circling a girl-child who was either

their invoker or their victim. In a third house a woman was squatting and shedding

menstrual blood through a hole in the floor. Several men, smaller than the woman

above by half, were swimming in the water below and undergoing some calamitous

transformation, presumably brought on by the menses. Their heads
had flowered into

dark, monstrous shapes; demonic tails had sprouted from their
backsides.

As Father Sandru had warned (or was it boasted?) to Zeffer, there was
no

part of the landscape depicted there on the walls that was not haunted
by some

bizarre sight or other. Even the clouds (innocent enough, surely) shat
rains of fire

in one place, and evacuated skulls in another. Demons cavorted
unchallenged over the

open sky, like dancers possessed by some celestial music, while stars
fell between

them; others rose over the horizon, leering like emaciated fools. And
in that same

sky, as though to suggest that this was a world of perpetual twilight,
teetering

always on the edge of darkness and extinction, was a sun that was
three-quarters

eclipsed by an exquisitely rendered moon, the latter painted so
cunningly it seemed

to have real mass, real roundness, as it slid over the face of the day-
star.

In one place there was painted a line of crowned figuresóthe kings and
queens of Romania, back to ancient timesópainted marching into the
ground. The noble

line rotted as it proceeded into the earth, carrion birds alighting on
the

descending lineage, plucking out regal eyes and law-giving tongues. In another place

a circle of witches rose in a spiral from a spot marked by standing-stones; their

innocent victims, babies whose fat had been used to make the flying ointment in

which they had slathered themselves, lay scattered between the stones like neglected

dolls.

And all through this world of monstrous hurts and occasional miracles, the

Hunt.

Many of the scenes were simply documents of the vigorous beauty of the

chase; they looked as though they could have been painted from life. There was a

pack of dogs, white and black and pie-bald (one bitch charmingly attending to her

suckling pups); some being muzzled by peasants, others straining on their leashes as

they were led away to join the great assembly of hunters. Elsewhere, the dogs could

be seen accompanying the hunters. Where the Duke had chosen to kneel and pray, a

white dog knelt beside him, his noble head bowed by the weight of shared devotion.

In another, the dogs were splashing in a river, attempting to catch the huge salmon

outlined in the stylized blue waters. And in a third place, for no apparent reason

Page 17

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

but the playfulness of the artists, the role of dogs and men had been reversed. A

long, beautiful decorated table had been set up in a clearing amongst the trees, and

at it sat a number of finely-bred dogs, while at their booted feet naked men fought

over scraps and bones. Closer examination showed the arrangement of figures to be

even more anarchic than it first appeared, for there were thirteen dogs at the

table, and in their center sat one dog with a halo perched between his pricked ears:

a canine Last Supper. An informed observer, knowing the traditional positions of the

Apostles, could have named them all. The writers of the Gospels were there in their

accustomed seats; John sitting closest to his master, Judas sitting at the perimeter

of the company, while Peter (a Saint Bernard) brooded at the other end, his furrowed

brow suggesting he already knew he would betray his master three times before the

long night was over.

Elsewhere in the landscape, the dogs were painted at far crueler work.

Tearing rabbits apart in one place, and ripping the flesh from a cornered stag in

another. In a third they were in a contest with a lion, and many had been

traumatically injured by the battle. Some crawled away from the place, trailing

their bowels; one had been thrown up into the trees, and its corpse hung there,

tongue lolling. Others lay sprawled in the grass in pools of blood. The hunters kept

their distance, no doubt waiting for the lion to become so weakened by blood-loss

that they could close in and claim the heroic moment for themselves.

But the most perverse of all the scenes were those in which erotic love and

hunting were conjoined.

There was, for instance, a place where the dogs had driven a number of naked

men and women up a gorge, where they had encountered a group of hunters armed with

spears and nets. The terrified couples clung to one another, but the netters and the

spearers knew their business. Men were separated from women and the men were run

through with spears, the women all bundled up in the nets, heaped on carts, and

carried away. The sexual servitude that awaited them was of a very particular kind.

Reading the walls from left to right the viewer's eye found that in an adjacent

valley the women were freed from the nets and strapped beneath the bodies of massive

centaurs, their legs stretched around the flanks of the animals. The women's

response to this terrible violation was something the artists had taken some trouble

to detail. One was screaming in agony, her head thrown back, as blood ran from the

place where she was being divided. Others appeared to be in ecstasy at this forced

marriage, pressing their faces joyously to the necks of their deflowerers.

But this part of the story did not finish there. If the 'reader', scanning

these walls, had continued his enquiry, he would have found that some of the men had

survived the massacre in the gorge, and returned, on a later sequence of tiles, to

hunt the creatures that had their wives in sexual thrall. These were some of the

most brilliantly painted sequences on the walls: the surviving lovers returning on

horseback, so as to match their speed to that of the centaurs. Lassoos circling in

the air over their heads, they closed on the centaurs, who were slowed down by the

very women they carried around to pleasure them. Several were brought down by ropes

around the neck, others were speared in the throat or flank. The women they carried

were not always lucky in these encounters. Though no doubt their rescuers intended

to free them, it was often the case that they perished beneath the weight of their

violators, as the dying centaurs rolled over, crushing them. Perhaps there was some

moral hereósome lesson about the vulnerability of the innocent women when two tribes

of males were set against one another; but the artists seemed to take too much

grisly pleasure in their depictions for this to be the case. Rather, it appeared to

be done for the pleasure of the doing; of the imagining, and of the rendering. There

was no moral from one end of this world to the other.

It would be possible to go on listing at great length the horrors and the

spectacles of the scenes laid out on the tile: the fields of dancing demons, the

fairy races, the succubi squatting on roofs, the holy fools draped in coats of

cow-dung, the satyrs, the spirits of graveside, roadside and hearth-side; the

weasel-kings and the bloated toads; and so on, and so on, behind every tree and on

every cloud, sliding down every waterfall and lingering beneath every rock: a world

haunted by the shapes of lust and animal lust and all that humanity called to its

bosom in the long nights of its despair.

Though Hollywoodóeven in its fledgling yearsówas presenting itself to the

world as the very soul of the imagination, there was nothing going on before the

Page 18

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

cameras there (nor would there be, ever) that could compete with what the master

tile-painters and their apprentices had created.

It was, as Sandru has said, the Devil's Country.

Zeffer went to Brascov to hire men, at prices five or six times what he

would have paid locally, because he wanted hands that could do the job with some

finesse, and minds that could count to a higher number than their fingers. He

devised the means by which the masterpiece could be removed himself. The tiles were

meticulously numbered on the reverse sides and a huge legend made of the room by

three cartographers he had also hired in the city, so that there would be a

meticulous record of the way the design had been laid out; and an obsessive

accounting of how the tiles were numbered, stacked and packed away;

including a

detailed description of which tiles were cracked or damaged before they were packed,

which had been mislaid by the original tilers (there were a hundred and sixteen such

tiles; most turned ninety or a hundred and eighty degrees by an artisan too tired,

too bewildered or perhaps too drunk to realize his error); all so that when the

tiles were unpacked at the house in Coldheart Canyon there would be no difficulty

reordering them into the original design.

It was a long process; a total of eleven weeks were to pass before the crated tiles were finally transported from the Fortress.

All the work had drawn much attention of course; from the brothers

themselves, who knew what was going on because Father Sandru had told them, and from

the villagers, who had only the vaguest of ideas of what all this was about. There

were rumors flying around that the removal was being undertaken because the tiles

had put the souls of the Fathers in spiritual jeopardy, but precise details of this

jeopardy changed from account to account.

The vast sum of money that was now in the possession of the Order did very

little to transform the lives of the priests, apart from inspiring some of

the most

embittered exchanges in the history of the brotherhood. Several of the priests were

of the opinion that the tiles should not have been sold (not because of their merit,

but because it was not wise to loose such unholy images on the secular world). To

this, Father Sandru who was more often, and more publicly, drunk by the day offered

only a sneering dismissal.

What does it matter?, he said to the complainers: they are only tiles, for

God's sake.

There were a good number of shaken heads by the way of response, and a very

eloquent riposte from one of the older Fathers, who said that God had put the tiles

into their protection, and it was cynical and careless of him to let them go. What

damage might they not do, out there in the world, he said; what hurt to innocent

souls?

Sandru was unmoved by all this. There were no innocent souls in Hollywood,

he had learned; nor was there any sin or excess painted in the tiles that the people

of that city were not intimately familiar with. He spoke with an authority which he

didn't in truth possess, but it sufficiently impressed the brothersóor at least a

greater number of themóso that the nay-sayers were finally silenced.

There was much debate about what should happen to the money. One faction,

led by the older men, believed it had been acquired by dubious means, and the only

uncorrupted way to dispose of it was to distribute it amongst the poor.

Surprisingly, very few voices supported this solution; some part of the money might

be given to the needy in the village, the priests agreed, but there were other

causes that should be attended to. There was some lobbying for a complete removal of

the Order to some other place than the Fortress; a more comfortable place, where

they could find their way to God without the Devil's shadow falling across their

path. It was Sandru who was the most eloquent advocate of their staying in the

Fortress. His tongue well lubricated with wine, he explained that he felt no sense

of regret that he'd sold the tiles; it was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, and he

was glad he'd taken it. Now, he said, they should use the money to rejuvenate the

place. Get the hospital up and running, as had always been the plan; see what they

could do about refertilizing the land, so that the vineyard would prosper as they

had in the old days.

"Our path is perfectly dear!" he said to the brothers. "Whether our faith in

the Lord is secure or not, we can heal here, and we can grow the grape, and pass our

lives with purpose."

He smiled as he spoke. That word *purpose* had not been on his lips for many

Page 19

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

years, and it gave him pleasure to speak it. But even as he spoke the smile started

to die away, and the color shrank from his ruddy face.

"I beg you to excuse me," he said, putting his hand to his belly, "I am sickened by too much brandy."

With that he pulled out of his robes the bottle from which he had been drinking since early morning, and set it clumsily down on the table in front of him.

Then he turned and stumbled out to get a breath of fresh air. Nobody went after him;

he had no friends left in the Fortress. His old allies were too embarrassed by his

excesses to publicly share his opinions; fearful that his behavior might reflect

poorly on them, and keep them from advancement. So he was alone as he wandered

giddily through the ruins of the dead vines. It was evening, and now that the summer

was past, the air was beginning to get chilly. But the sky overhead was a perfect

blue, and there was a new moon, its pallid crescent just clearing the mountains.

Sandru tried to let the sight of the sky and moon calm him; have them placate the pain of his heart, give life back to his numbed fingers. But the trick

was beyond them. He realized suddenly that this was not a spasm brought on by too

much brandy. He was dying.

The Brothers had medicines for weakness of the heart, he knew; it would not

be the end of him if he got back to them quickly enough. He turned on his heel,

attempting to voice a shout of alarm. But his panicked chest would provide no breath

for him to cry for help. His legs began to fail him, and down he went, face first,

into the dirt. He tasted the soil in his mouth, bitter and unappetizing. He spat it

out; and with the last of his strength he pushed himself up out of the filth and let

gravity roll him over. He could not move, but it didn't matter. The darkening sky

overhead was spectacle enough. He lay there for six or seven shortening gasps, while

a star, lonely in its solitude, brightened at his zenith. Then he let life go.

The Brothers did not find him until the middle of the night, by which time a

frost had settled on the old vineyard, the first frost of that autumn. It glittered

on the bulk of the dead Father; on his bulbous nose and in the knots of his beard.

It had even inscribed its filigrees on his unblinking eyes.

FOUR

There was no hospital established at the Fortress; then or ever. Nor was

there any attempt to replant the vineyard, or make the grounds around the Fortress

in any way flourish. With Father Sandru's passing (at the relatively tender age of

sixty-two), what little enthusiasm there had been for change withered. The younger

men decided to leave the Fortress; three of them left the Order entirely and became

members of the secular community. Of the three, oneó a young man by the name of Jan

Valek took his own life less than a year later, leaving a long suicide note, a kind

of epistle to his sometime brothers, in which he wrote of how he'd had a dream after

the death of Father Sandru, in which "I met the Father in the vineyards, which were

all burning. It was a terrible place to be. Black smoke was filling the sky,

blotting out the sun. He said to me that this was Hell, this world, and there was

only one way to escape it, and that was to die. His face was bright, even in the

darkness. He said he wished he'd died earlier, instead of going on suffering in the

world.î

"I asked him if they allowed him to drink brandy wherever he was now. He

said he had no need of brandy; his existence was happy; there was no need to conceal

the pain with drinking.

"Then I told him I still had a life to live in the world, whereas he had been an old man, with a weak heart. I was strong, I said, and there was a good

chance I'd be alive for another thirty, maybe forty years, which was an agony to me,

but what could I do?

"So take your own life,' he said to me. He made it sound so simple. 'Cut

your throat. God understands.î

"He does?' I said to him.î

"Certainly,' he told. 'This world is Hell. Just look around. What do you

see?"

"I told him what I saw. Fire, smoke, block earth. "

"See?" he said, 'Hell.'

"I told him, though of course I was still dreaming, I was going to take his

advice. I was going to go back to my room, find a sharp knife, and kill myself. But

Page 20

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

for some reason, as often happens in dreams, I didn't go home. I went into

Bucharest. To the cinema where Brother Stefan used to bring me sometimes, to see

films. We went inside. It was very dark. We found seats and Stefan had me sit down.

Then the film began. And it was a film about some earthly paradise. It made me weep,

it was so perfect, this place. The music, the way the people looked. Beautiful men

and women, all so lovely it took my breath away to look at them. There was one young

man in particular and it makes me ashamed to write this, but if I don't do it here,

in my last confession, where will I do it? A young man with dark hair and

light-filled eyes, who opened his arms to me. He was naked, on the screen, with open

arms, inviting me into his embrace. I turned to Father Stefan in the darkness, and

he said the very thing that was going through my mind. 'He wants to take you into

his arms.'

"I started to deny it. But Stefan interrupted me and said: 'Look at him.

Look at his face. It's flawless. Look at his body. It's perfect. And there's

his legs

"I covered my face in shame, but Stefan pulled my hands from my face and

told me not to be ashamed, just to look, and enjoy looking. 'God made all of this

for our pleasure,' he said. 'Why would he give us such a hunger to look at nakedness

unless he wanted us to take pleasure in it?'

"I asked Stefan how he knew it was God's work. Perhaps the Devil had made

nakedness, I said, to tempt us and ensnare us. He laughed, and put his arm around

me, and kissed me on the cheek as though I was just a little child.

"This isn't the Devil's work,' he said. 'This is your invitation to paradise.'

Then he kissed me again, and I felt a warm wind blowing, as though it was

spring in whatever country they had created on the screen. And the wind made me want

to die with pleasure, because it smelled of a time I remembered from long ago.â

"So now I have come back to my room. I have a knife. When I have finished

writing this I will leave what I have written on the table, and I will go out into

the field, and cut my wrists. I know we are taught that self-slaughter is a sin, and

that the Lord does not wish us to harm ourselves, but if He does not wish me to end

my life, why is this knife within reach of my hand, and why is my heart so much at

peace?"

His body was found about a hundred yards from the place where Sandru's

frost-covered body had been discovered. Coming so soon upon the death of the old

priest, the death of Jan Valek undid the Brotherhood completely. Orders came from

Bucharest, and the Brotherhood was disbanded. There was no need to guard the

Fortress any longer, the Archbishop said. The brothers would be more useful to the

Church if they worked with the sick and the dying, to offer the Lord's comfort where

it was most needed.

Within a week, the Order of St. Teodor had left the Fortress Goga.

There were those among the villagers who felt that the Fortress had

invited

its abandonment, and began its own process of self-slaughter.
Superstition, no

doubt; but it was certainly strange that after five centuries of life,
during which

span it had remained strong, a quick process of disintegration should
begin as soon

as the community of caretakers departed.

True, the winter immediately following was particularly severe. But
there

had been heavier snows on the roofs and they had not bowed beneath
the weight; there

had been stronger winds through the casements and they'd not broken
open and

smashed, there had been more persistent floodings of the lower floors,
and the doors

had not been carried off on their rotted hinges.

By the time the spring came round which was late April that year the

Fortress had effectively become uninhabitable. It was as though its
soul had gone

out of it, and now all it wanted was to allow the seasons to take their
steady toll.

They were guileless collaborators. The summer was as violently hot as
the winter had

been bitter, and it bred all manner of destroyers in the fabric of the
building.

Worm and fly and wasp contributed to the baking heat of the sun with
their

burrowings and layings and nestings. Beams that had taken ten men to lift them

became dusty, hollow things, as delicate as the bones of immense birds. Unable to

support their own weight, they collapsed upon themselves, bringing down entire

floors as they fell. By the time September arrived, the Fortress was open to the

elements. The ward where the brothers had optimistically laid out rows of beds now

had a ceiling of cloud. When the first rains of autumn came the mattresses were

Page 21

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

soaked; fungus and mildew sprouted where the sick would have lain. The place stank

of rot from end to end.

And finally, somewhere in the middle of the second winter in its empty

state, the floorboards cracked and opened up, and the lowest level of the Fortress,

the level where Father Sandru had brought Zeffer to show him the tiled chamber,

became available to sky and storm. If anyone had ventured into the Fortress that

winter they would have witnessed the most delicate of spectacles. Through the eight

vaults above the once-tiled room which were now all cracked like

eggssó snow came

spiraling down. It fell into a room denuded. The workmen Zeffer had hired to do the

work of removing the tiles had first been obliged to empty the room of all the monks

had left in there. Some of the furniture had subsequently been stolen, some broken

up for firewood, and the restó perhaps a quarter of the bountyó simply left to decay

where it had been piled up. The snow, spiraling down, settled in little patches on

the floor; patches which would not melt for the next four months, but only get wider

and deeper as the winter's storms got worse, the snow heavier.

Just before the thaw, in the middle of the following April, the weight of

snow and ice finally brought the vaults down, in one calamitous descent. There was

nobody there to witness it, nor anyone within earshot to hear it. The room which had

contained the Hunt was buried in the debris of all the vaults, plaster and wood and

stone filling the chamber to the middle of the walls. Nobody who visited the

Fortress in subsequent yearsó and there were a few explorers who came there every

summer, usually imagining they'd stumbled on something darkly marvelousó a Fortress,

perhaps, belonging to Vlad the Impaler, whose legendary territories lay only a few

hundred miles off to the west, in Transylvania—none of these visitors dug through

the overgrown ruins with any great enthusiasm; certainly none ever asked themselves

what function the half-buried room might have once served. Nor, should it be said,

would they have been able to guess, even the cleverest of them. The mystery of the

ruined chamber had been removed to another continent, where it was presently

unfolding its dubious raptures for the delectation of a new and vulnerable audience.

Men and women who—like the tiles—had in many cases lately left their homelands; and

in their haste to be famous left behind them such talismans as hearth and altar

might have offered by way of protection against the guileful Hunt.

PART TWO

THE HEART-THROB

ONE

There's a premiere in Los Angeles tonight, at Grauman's Chinese Theatre. The

Chinese has been housing such events since 1923, but of course the crowds were much

larger back then, tens of thousands of people, sometimes even hundreds of thousands,

would block Hollywood Boulevard in their hunger to see the star of the moment.

Tonight's event is nowhere near that scale. Though the studio publicists' will

massage the numbers for tomorrow's Variety and Hollywood Reporter, claiming that a

crowd of four thousand people waited in the chilly evening air for the appearance of

the star of tonight's movie, Todd Pickett, the true numbers are in fact less than

half that.

Still, a third of the Boulevard is barricaded off, and there are a few cop

cars in evidence, just to give the whole event more drama.

As the limos approach the red carpet, and the ushers, who are dressed in the

black leather costumes of the villains in the movie, step forward to open the doors

a few 'screamers', paid and planted in the crowd by the studio publicity people to

get a little excitement going, start to do their job, yelling even before the face

of the limo's passenger has been seen. There's a large contingent of A-list names on

tonight's guest-list, and plenty of faces that elicit screams as they appear. Cruise

isn't here, but Nicole Kidman is; so is Schwarzenegger, who has a small role in the

picture as the retiring Gallows, a vengeful, mythological character whom our hero,

played by Todd Pickett, must either choose to embody when his time comes round,

or should he refuse be pursued by the ghosts of several generations of former

incarnations of the character, to persuade him otherwise. Sigourney Weaver plays the

woman who has broken the curse of Gallows once before, to whom Pickett's character

must go when the phantom pursuers are almost upon him. Her arrival at Grauman's is

greeted by a genuine roar of approval from the fans, who are devoted to her. She

waves, smiles, allows a barrage of photographs to be taken, but she doesn't go near

Page 22

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

the crowd. She's had experiences with overly-possessive fans before: she walks

straight down the middle of the red carpet, where she's out of reach of their

fingers. Still they shout, 'We love you Ripley!', which is the character she plays

in the Alien movies, and with which she will be identified until the day she dies.

She waves, even when they call the name Ripley, but her eyes never focus on anybody

in the crowd for more than a moment.

The next limo in the line contains the bright new star of Gallows, Suzie

Henstell, named by this month's Vanity Fair one of the Ten Hottest Names in

Hollywood. She is petite (though you'd never know it on the screen), blonde and

giggly; she's shared a little marijuana with her boyfriend in the limo, and it was a

bad move. She stumbles a little as she steps onto the red carpet, but the crowd has

been prepped, thanks to several months of puff pieces and photo-spreads and in-depth

interviews, to think of this woman as a full-blown star, even though they have yet

to see more than a few frames of her acting ability from the trailer for Gallows. So

what do they care if she looks a little out of it? Unlike Ms. Weaver, who wisely

chooses to be elusive, allowing the photographers just a minute or two to catch her,

the new girl is still hungry for adulation. She goes straight to the barricades,

where a number of young women with souvenir programs for Gallows are waving them

around. She signs a few, giving her boyfriend, who is a six-foot Calvin Klein model

hunk, a goofy 'gee-I-must-be-famous!' look. The model looks back vacantly, which is

the only look in his repertoire. He can give it to you vacantly with a semi hard-on

in his jeans, or vacantly with his ass hanging out of his Y-fronts. Either way, it

is heart-achingly beautiful; almost troublingly so.

The wind comes in gusts along Hollywood Boulevard, and the security men

start to look a little worried. It was some bright publicist's idea to build two

gallows, as a kind of gateway through which the audience for the premiere will need

to come. Not, it now seems, a clever notion. The gallows are made to be trashed

tomorrow morning, so they're made of light timber and foam-core. The wind is

threatening to topple them; or worse, pick them up entirely and deposit them on top

of the crowd. Light though they are, they could do some serious damage if they fell.

Four of the ushers from inside the theatre are summoned from their duties

and told to go and stand beside the gallows, two on either side, holding on to them

as casually as possible. Security is told that the publicity people only need five

more minutes. As soon as Suzie Henslett can be persuaded to move on up the carpet

and into the building (which at present she is showing no desire to do), the

director's, Rob Neiderman's, limo can be brought to the carpet,
followed by the last

and most important of the bunch, Todd Pickett.

The wind is getting worse; the gallows sway giddily. An executive
decision

is made to bring Neiderman's limo in, and if Suzie's screaming fans are
visible

waving like lunatics behind Neiderman in his press pictures, so be it.
This isn't a

perfect world. It's already 8:13pm. At this rate the picture won't be
able to begin

until half past the hour, which wouldn't be a problem if the damn
thing weren't so

long, but Neiderman's cut came in at two hours and forty-three
minutes, and though

the studio appealed to Pickett to get him to shave the thing down to a
tight two

hours, Todd came back saying he liked the picture pretty much as it
was, so only

four minutes were going out of it. That means it'll be past eleven
before the

picture's finished, and almost midnight by the time everybody's
assembled at the

party venue. It's going to be a long night.

Neiderman has persuaded the easily-distracted Miss Henslett away
from her

fans and down the carpet to the door. The big moment is at hand. The
ushers cling to

the gallows, their jobs depending on the perpendicularity of their charges. The

largest of the limos comes up to the curb. Even before the door has opened, the

fansóespecially the womenóare in a state of ecstasy, shrieking at the top of their

voices.

"Todd! Todd! Oh God! Todd!"

The cameras start to flash, as though the incomprehensible semaphore of

their flashes is going to summon the man in the limo.

And out comes Todd Pickett, the star of Gallows, the reason why ninety-five

percent of its audience will be there when it opens next Friday (it is now Monday);

Todd Pickett, one of the three biggest male action-movie-stars in the history of

cinema. Todd Pickett, the boy from Cincinnati who failed in all his grades but ended

up the King of Hollywood.

He raises his hands like a presidential candidate, to acknowledge the shouts

of the crowd. Then he reaches back into the limo to catch hold of the hand of his

Page 23

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

date for the night, Wilhemina Bosch, a

waitress-turned-model-turned-actress-turned-model again, with whom he has been seen

at parties and premieres for the past four months, though neither will say anything

about the relationship than that they're good friends.

He gathers Wilhemina to him, so that the photographers can get pictures of

them together. Then arm in arm, through the blizzard of rights and the barrage of We

love you, Todd coming at them from every side, the pair make their way to the cinema

doors, whichóhaving gathered their most important guests into the fold, then close

rather defiantly, as if to divide the important from the unimportant, the stable and

the solid from those who are simply objects of the night's wind.

Gallows is an irredeemable piece of shit, of course, and everyone involved

with it, from the executives who green-lit it (at a cost of some ninety-million

dollars, before prints and advertising costs add another thirty-seven to the bill)

to the humblest publicist, knows.

It is, in the words of Corliss's review in Time, 'an old fashioned,

action-horror picture which lacks the full-bone theatrics of grand guignol, and the

savvy, John Woo-style action piece audiences have come to expect. One minute

Schwarzenegger is camping it up, the next Todd Pickett, as his unwilling successor,

is playing his scenes as though he's Hamlet on a particularly dreary night in

Denmark. From beginning to end, Gallows is bad noose.¹

Everybody going up the red carpet that Monday night already knows what Time

is going to say; Corliss had made his contempt for the picture very plain in a piece

about the state of action movies he wrote two weeks before. Nor does it take an

oracle to predict that there will be others who will not like the picture. But the

extent of vitriol will prove astonishing, even to those who expected the worst. In

the next forty-eight hours, Gallows will garner some of the most negative reviews of

the last twelve months, the vehemence of the early news reviewers empowering minor

names to pull out the stops. Besides the incomprehensible script, everyone agrees,

there is a lackluster quality to the picture that betrays the cast's indifference to

the entire project. Performances aren't simply uneven, they seemed designed for

entirely different movies: a hopeless mismatch of styles. The worst culprit in this

regard? There is no question about that. All the reviewers will agree that the most

inadequate performance comes from its star, Todd Pickett.

People writes that: "Mr. Pickett is plenty old enough to know better.

Thirty-something-year-olds don't act the way Mr. Pickett acts here: his trademark

'young man with a chip on his shoulder and a thousand-watt smile,' which was looking

stale the second (all right, the third) time he did it, seems particularly

out-of-place here. Though it seems incredible that time has passed so fast since

America first swooned to the charms of Mr. Pickett, he's now simply too old to play

the twenty-something Vincent. Only Wilhemina Bosch, as Vincent's Prozac-chewing

sister, comes out of this mess with any credibility. She has an elegant,

beautifully-proportioned face, and she can turn a line with the snappy, East-coast

smarts of a young Katherine Hepburn. She's wasted here. Or, more correctly, our time

would be wasted here were she not in the movie."

The premiere audience didn't seem to mind it. On occasion there were audible

gasps and loud laughter (perhaps in truth a little over-loud, a little fake) for the

jokes, but there were several long stretches in the Second Act, when the movie

seemed to lose their interest. Even in the Third Act, when the action relocates to

the orbiting space station, and the special effects budget soared, there was very

little real enthusiasm. A few scattered whoops of nihilistic delight when the

villain's planet-destroying weapon actually went off, against expectation, and

Washington DC is fried to a crisp. But then, as the smoke cleared and Todd, as the

new Gallows, proceeded to finish off the bad guys, the audience became restless

again.

About fifteen minutes before the end credits rolled a member of the audience

got up from his seat on the aisle and went to the bathroom. A few people caught a

look at the man's face as he looked back at the screen. It was Todd Pickett, lit by

the light of his own face. Nobody got up to ask for his autograph.

Pickett stared at the screen for a moment only, then he turned his back on

it and trudged up and out of the cinema. He didn't go to the restroom. Instead he

asked one of the ushers if he could be allowed out of the back of the building. The

usher explained that the area around the back had no security.

Page 24

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"I just want a quiet smoke with nobody watching me," Todd explained.

The usher said, sure, why not, and led Todd down a passageway that ran

behind the screen. Todd looked up at his reversed image on the screen. All he could

remember about the scene that was playing was how damn uncomfortable his costume had

been.

"Here you go," the usher said, unlocking the doors at the end of the

corridor, and letting Todd out into an area lit only by the ambient light from the

Boulevard.

"Thanks," Todd said, giving him a twenty-buck bill. "I'll be back out front

by the time the credits roll."

The usher thanked him for the twenty-note and left him to himself. Todd took

out a cigarette, but it never got to his lips. A wave of nausea overtook him, so

powerful and so sudden that it was all he could do not to puke down his own tuxedo.

Up came the scotches he'd had in the limo as he drove on down to the premiere, and

the pepperoni pizza, with three cheeses and extra anchovies, he'd had to add

ballast. With the first heave over (something told him there were more to come) he

had the presence of mind to look around, and confirm that this nasty little scene

was not being spied on, or worse, photographed. Luckily, he was alone. All he had

for company back here was the detritus of premieres past; piles of standees and

gaudy scenery pieces designed to advertise movies gone by: Mel Gibson against an

eruption of lurid flame; Godzilla's eye; the bottom half of a girl in a very short

dress. He got to his feet and stumbled away from the stench of his vomit, making his

way through this graveyard of old glories, heading for the darkest place he could

find in which to hide his giddy head. Behind him, through the still-open door, he

could hear the sound of gunfire, and the muted sound of his own voice:

"Come on out, you sonofabitch," he was yelling to somebody. By now, if the

movie had been working, the audience would have been yelling and screaming, wild

with blood-lust. But despite the over-amped soundtrack, nobody was yelling, because

nobody gave a damn. The movie was dying on its feet.

Another wave of nausea rose up in him. He reached out to catch hold of

something so that he didn't fall down and his outstretched hand knocked over a

cardboard cut-out of Tom Cruise, which toppled backwards and hit a cardboard

Titanic, which in turn crashed against a cardboard Mighty Joe Young, and so on and

so forth, like a row of candy-colored dominoes, stars falling against ships falling

against monsters, all toppling back into a darkness so deep they were an

indistinguishable heap.

Luckily, the noise of his vomiting was covered by the din of his own movie.

He puked again, twice, until his stomach had nothing left to give up. Then he turned

his back on the vomit and the toppled idols, and stepped away to find a lungful of

dean air to inhale. The worst was over. He lit his cigarette, which helped settle

his stomach, and rather than returning inside, where the picture was two minutes

from finishing, he walked along side of the building until he found a patch of

street-light where he could assess himself. He was lucky. His suit was unspattered.

There was a spot of vomit on his shoes, but he cleaned it off with his handkerchief

(which he tossed away) and then sprayed his tongue and throat with wintergreen

breath-cleanser. His hair was cropped short (that was the way it was in the movie,

and he'd kept the style for public appearances), so he had no fear that it was out

of place. He probably looked a little pale, but what the hell? Pale was in.

There was a gate close to the front of the building, guarded by a security

officer. She recognized Todd immediately, and unlocked the gate.

"Getting out before it gets too crazy?" she said to him. He smiled and nodded. "You want an escort to your car?"

"Yeah, thanks."

One of the executive producers, an over-eager Englishman called George

Dipper, with whom Todd had never worked before, was standing on the red carpet, his

presence ignored by the press, who were standing around chatting to one another, or

checking their cameras before the luminaries reappeared. George caught Todd's eye,

and hurried over, dragging on his own cigarette as though his life depended on its

nicotine content.

There was scattered applause from inside, which quickly died away.

The picture was over.

"I think it played brilliantly," George said, his eyes begging for a

syllable of agreement. "They were with us all the way. Don't you think so?"

"It was fine," Todd said, without commitment.

Page 25

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"Forty million, the first weekend."

"Don't get your hopes up."

"You don't think we'll do forty?"

"I think it'll do fine."

George's face lit up. Todd Pickett, the man he'd paid twenty million dollars

to (plus a sizable portion of the back-end) was declaring it fine. God was in His

Heaven. For a terrible moment Todd thought the man was going to weep with relief.

"At least there's nothing big opening against it," Todd said, "So we've got

one weekend clear."

"And your fans are loyal," George said. Again, the desperation in the eyes.

Todd couldn't bear to look at him any longer.

"I'm just goin' to make a quick getaway," Todd said, glancing towards the

theater doors.

The first of the crowd were emerging. If the expressions on the first five

faces he scanned were an omen, his instincts were right: they did not have a hit. He

turned his back on the crowd, telling George he'd see him later.

"You are coming to the party?" George said, hanging on to him as he headed

down the carpet.

Where was Marco? Todd thought. Trusty Marco, who was always there when he

was needed. "Yes, I'll pop in later," he said, glancing back over his shoulder at

George to reassure him.

In the seconds since he'd turned away the audience spilling from the theatre

door had jumped from five to a hundred. Half of them saw him. In just a few seconds

they'd be surrounding him, yelling his name, telling him they loved this and they

hated that, touching him, pulling on himó

"Here, boss!"

Marco called to him from the curb. The limo door was open. God bless him!

Todd raced down the carpet as people behind him started to call his name; cameras

started to flash. Into the limo. Marco slammed the door. Todd locked it. Then Marco

dashed around to the driver's seat with a remarkable turn of speed given his

poundage, and got in.

"Where to?"

"Mulholland."

Mulholland Drive winds through the city like a lazy serpent for many miles;

but Marco didn't need to know where along its length his boss wanted to be taken.

There was a spot close to Coldwater Canyon, where the undulating drive offers a

picture-perfect view of the San Fernando Valley, as far as the mountains. By day it

can be a smog-befouled spectacle, brown and gray. But by night, especially in the

summer, it is a place of particular enchantment: the cities of Burbank, North

Hollywood and Pasadena laid out in a matrix of amber lights, receding to the dark

wall of the mountains. And moving against the darkness, the lights of planes

circling as they await their instruction to land at Burbank Airport, or the police

helicopters passing over the city, spitting a beam of white light.

Often there were sightseers parked at the spot, enjoying the scene. But

tonight, thank God, there were none. Marco parked the car and Todd got out,

wandering to the cliff-edge to look at the scene before him.

Marco got out too, and occupied his time with wiping the windshield of the

limo. He was a big man with the bearded face of a bear recently woken from

hibernation, and he possessed a curious mixture of talents: a sometime wrestler and

ju-jitsu black belt, he was also a trained Cordon Bleu cook (not that Todd's taste

called for any great culinary sophistication) and a twice-divorced father of three

with an encyclopedic knowledge of the works of Wagner. More importantly, he was

Todd's right-hand man; loyal to a fault. There was no part of Todd's existence Marco

Caputo did not have some part of. He took care of the hiring and firing of domestic

staff and gardeners, the buying and the driving of cars, and of course all the

security duties.

"The movie's shit, huh?" he said matter-of-factly.

"Worse than."

"Sorry 'bout that."

"Not your fault. I should never have done it. Shit script. Shit movie."

"You want to give the party a miss?"

"Nah. I gotta go. I promised Wilhemina. And George."

"You got something going with her?"

Page 26

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"Wilhemina? Yeah. I got something. I just don't know whether I want to. Plus

she's got an English boyfriend."

"The English are all fags."

"Yeah."

"You want me to swing by the party and bring her back up to the house for

you?"

"Suppose she says no?"

"Oh come on. When did any girl say no to you?"

Todd said nothing. He just stared out over the vista of lights. The wind came up out of the valley, smelling of gas fumes and Chinese food. The Santa Anas,

hot off the Mojave, gusted against his face. He closed his eyes to enjoy the moment,

but what came into his head was an image of himself: a still from the movie he'd

fled from tonight. He studied the face in his mind's eye for a moment.

Then he said: "I look tired."

TWO

Todd Picket had made two of his three most successful pictures under the

aegis of a producer by the name of Kever Smotherman. The first of them was called

Gunner; the kind of high concept, testosterone-marinated picture Smotherman had been

renowned for making. It had made Todd—who was then an unknown from Ohio—a bona-fide

movie-star, if not overnight then certainly within a matter of weeks.
He hadn't been

required to turn in a performance. Smotherman didn't make movies
that required

actors, only breath-taking physical specimens. And Todd was certainly
that. Every

time he stepped before the cameras, whether he was sharing the scene
with a girl or

a fighter-plane, he was all the eye wanted to watch. The camera
worked some kind of

alchemy upon him; and he worked the same magic on celluloid.

In life, he was good-looking, but flawed. He was a little on the short
side,

with broad hips; he was also conspicuously bandy. But on the screen,
all these flaws

disappeared. He became gleaming, studly perfection, his jaw-line
heroic, his gaze

crystalline, his mouth an uncommon mingling of the sensual and the
severe. His

particular beauty had suited the taste of the times, and by the end of
that first,

extraordinary summer of coming-to-fame his image, dressed in an
immaculate white

uniform which made poetry of his buttocks, had become an indelible
piece of cinema

iconography.

Over the years, other stars had risen just as high, of course, and many just

as quickly. But few were quite as ready for their ascent as Todd Pickett. This was

what he'd been polishing himself for since the moment his mother, Patricia Donna

Pickett, had first taken him into a cinema in downtown Cincinnati. Looking up at the

screen, watching the parade of faces pass before him, he'd known instinctively (at

least so he later claimed) that he belonged up there with those stars, and that if

he willed it hard enough, willed and worked for it, then it was merely a matter of

time before he joined the parade.

After the success of Gunner, he fell effortlessly into the labors of being a

movie star. In interviews he was courteous, funny and self-effacing, playing the

interviewers so easily that all but the most cynical swooned. He was confident about

his charms, but he wasn't cocky; loyal to his Mid-Western roots and boyishly devoted

to his mother. Most attractive of all, he was honest about his shortcomings as an

actor. There was a refreshing lack of pretension about the Pickett persona.

The year after Gunner, he made two pictures back to back. Another

action

blockbuster for Smotherman, called Lightning Rod, which was released on Independence

Day and blew all former box-office records to smithereens, and then, for the

Christmas market, Life Lessons. The latter was a sweetly sentimental slip of a

story, in which Todd played opposite Sharon Campbell, a Playboy model turned actress

who had been tabloid fodder at the time thanks to her recent divorce from an

alcoholic and abusive husband. The pairing of Pickett and Campbell had worked like a

charm, and the reviews for Todd's performance were especially kind. While he was

still relying on his physical gifts, the critics observed, there were definitely

signs that he was taking on the full responsibilities of an actor, digging deeper

into himself to engage his audience. Nor was he afraid to show weakness; twice in

Life Lessons he was required to sob like a baby, and he did so very convincingly.

The picture was a huge hit, meaning that both of the big money-makers of the year

had Todd's name above the title. He was officially box-office gold.

For most of the following decade he could do no wrong. Inevitably, some of

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

his pictures performed better than others, but even the disappointments were

triumphs by comparison with the fumbling labors of most of his contemporaries.

Of course, he wasn't making the choice of material on his own. From the

beginning he'd had a close relationship with his manager, Maxine Frizelle, a short,

sharp bitch of a woman in her mid-forties who'd once been voted the Most Despised

Person in Hollywood, and had asked, when the news had reached her, if the awards

ceremony was full evening dress. Though she'd been representing other agents when

she first took Todd on, she'd let them all go once his career began to demand her

complete attention. Thereafter she lived and breathed the Pickett business,

control-ring every element of his life, private and professional. The price she

asked studios for his services rapidly rose to unheard of heights, and she drove the

deal home every single time. She had an opinion about everything: rewrites, casting,

the hiring of directors, art-directors, costume designers and directors of

photographers. Her only concern were the best interests of her wonder-boy. In the

language of an older but similarly feudal system, she was the power behind the

throne; and everyone who worked with Todd, from the heads of studios to humble

hair-stylists, had some encounter with her to relate, some scar to show.

Needless to say, the Pickett magic couldn't remain unchallenged forever.

There were always new stars in the ascendancy, new faces with the new smiles

appearing on the screen every season, and after ten years of devotion the audience

that had doted on Todd in the mid-to-late eighties began to look elsewhere for its

heroes. It wasn't that his pictures performed less well, but that others performed

even better. A new definition of a blockbuster had appeared; money-machines like

Independence Day and Titanic, which earned so much so quickly that pictures which

would once have been called major hits were now in contrast simply modest successes.

Anxious to regain the ground he was losing, Todd decided to go back into

business with Smotherman, who was just as eager to return to their glory days

together. The project they'd elected to do together was a movie called

Warrior, a

piece of high concept junk about a street-fighter from Brooklyn who is brought

through time to champion a future earth in a battle against marauding aliens. The

script was a ludicrous concoction of clichés pulled from every cheesy

science-fiction B-movies of the fifties, and an early budget had put the picture

somewhere in the region of a hundred million dollars simply to get it on screen, but

Smotherman was confident that he could persuade either Fox or Paramount to

green-light it. The show had everything, he said: an easily-grasped idea (primitive

fighting man outwits hyper-intelligent intergalactic empire, using cunning and brute

force); a dozen action sequences which called for state-of-the-art effects, and the

kind of hero Todd could perform in his sleep: an ordinary man put in an

extraordinary situation. It was a no-brainer, all around. The studios would be fools

not to green-light it; it had all the marks of a massive hit.

He was nothing if not persuasive. In person, Smotherman was almost a parody

of a high-voltage salesman: fast-talking, short-tempered and over-sexed. There was

never an absence of 'babes', as he still called them, in his immediate

vicinity; all

were promised leading roles when they'd performed adequately for Smotherman in

private, and all, of course, were discarded the instant he tired of them.

Preparations for Warrior were proceeding nicely. Then the unthinkable

happened. A week shy of his forty-fourth birthday, Smotherman died. He'd always been

a man of legendary excess, a bottom-feeder happiest in the gamier part of any city.

The circumstances of his death were perfectly consistent with this reputation: he'd

died sitting at a table in a private club in New York, watching a lesbian sex show,

the coronary that had felled him so massive and so sudden he had apparently been

overtaken by it before he could even cry out for help. He was face down in a pile of

cocaine when he was found, a drug he'd continued to consume in heroic quantities

long after his contemporaries had cleaned up their acts and had their sinuses

surgically reconstructed. It was one of the thirty-five illegal substances found in

his system at the autopsy.

He was buried in Las Vegas, according to the instructions in his will. He's

been happiest there, he'd always said, with everything to win and

everything to

lose.

This remark was twice quoted at the memorial service, and hearing it, Todd

felt a cold trickle of apprehension pass down his spine. What Smotherman had known,

and been at peace with, was the fact that all of Tinseltown was a game and it could

be lost in a heartbeat. Smotherman had been a gambling man. He'd taken pleasure in

Page 28

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

the possibility of failure and it had sweetened his success. Todd, on the other

hand, had never even played the slots, much less a game of poker or roulette.

Sitting there listening to the hypocrites most of whom had despised Smotherman stand

up and extol the dead man, he realized that Keever's passing cast a pall over his

future. The golden days were over. His place in the sun would very soon belong to

others; if it didn't already.

The day after the memorial service he poured his fears out to Maxine. She

was all reassurance.

"Smotherman was a dinosaur," she said as she sipped her vodka. "The

only

reason people put up with his bullshit all those years was because he made everybody

a lot of money. But let's be honest: he was a low-life. You're a class act. You've

got nothing to worry about."

"I don't know," Todd said, his head throbbing from one too many drinks. "I

look at myself sometimes..."

"And what?"

"I'm not the guy I was when I made Gunner."

"Damn right you're not. You were nobody then. Now you're one of the most

successful actors in history."

"There's others coming up."

"So what?" Maxine said, waving his concerns away.

"Don't do that!" Todd said, slamming his palm down on the table.

"Don't try

and placate me! Okay? We have a problem. Smotherman was going to put me back on top,

and now the son of a bitch is dead!"

"All right. Calm down. All I'm saying is that we don't need Smotherman.

We'll hire somebody to rework the script, if that's what you want. Then we'll find

somebody hip to direct it. Somebody with a contemporary style.

Smotherman was an

old-fashioned guy. Everything had to be big. Big explosion. Big tits. Big guns.

Audiences don't care about any of that any more. You need to be part of what's

coming up, not what happened yesterday. You know, I hate to say it, but perhaps

Keever's dying is the best thing that could have happened. We need a new look for

you. A new Todd Pickett."

"You think it's as simple as that?" Todd said. He wanted so much to believed

that Maxine had the problem solved.

"How difficult can it be?" Maxine said. "You're a great star. We just need

to get people focused on you again." She pondered for a moment. "You know what? We

should set up a lunch with Gary Eppstadt."

"Oh Jesus, why? You know how I hate that ugly little fuck"

ìAn ugly little fuck he may be. But he is going to pay for Warrior. And if

he's going put twenty million and a slice of the back-end on the table for your

services to art, you can make nice with the son of a bitch for an hour."

THREE

It wasn't simply personal antipathy that had made Todd refer to Eppstadt so

unflatteringly. It was the unvarnished truth. Eppstadt was the ugliest man in Los

Angeles. Charitably, his eyes might have been called reptilian, his lips unkissable.

His mother, in a fit of blind affection, might have noted that he was

disproportioned. All this said, the man was still a narcissist of the first rank. He

hung only the most expensive suits on his unfortunate carcass: his fingernails were

manicured with obsessive precision; his personal barber trimmed his dyed hair every

morning, having shaved him first with a straight razor.

There had been countless prayers offered up to that razor over the years,

entreating it to slip! But Eppstadt seemed to live a charmed life. He'd gone from

strength to strength as he moved around the studios, claiming the paternity of every

success, and blaming the failures on those who stood immediately behind him on the

ladder, whom he promptly fired. It was the oldest trick in the book, but it had

worked flawlessly. In an age in which corporations increasingly had the power, and

studios were run by committees of business-school graduates and lawyers with an itch

to have their fingers in the creative pie, Eppstadt was one of the old school. A

powermonger, happiest in the company of somebody who needed his patronage, whom he

could then abuse in a hundred subtle ways. That was his pleasure, and his revenge.

What did he need beauty for, when he could make it tremble with a smiling maybe!

He was in a fine mood when he and Todd, with Maxine in attendance, met for

Page 29

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

lunch on Monday. Paramount had carried the weekend with a brutal revenge picture

that Eppstadt had taken a hand in making, firing the director off the project after

two unpromising preview screenings, and hiring somebody else to shoot a rape scene

and a new ending, in which the violated woman terrorized and eventually dispatched

her attacker with a hedge-cutter.

"Thirty-two point six million dollars in three days," he preened. "In

January. That's a hit. And you know what? There's nobody in the picture. Just a

couple no-name TV stars. It was all marketing."

"Is the picture any good?" Todd asked.

"Yeah, it's fucking Hamlet," Eppstadt said, without missing a beat. "You're

looking weary, my friend," he went on. "You need a vacation. I've been

taking time

at this monasteryó"

"Monastery?"

"Sounds crazy, right? But you feel the peace. You feel the tranquility.
And

they take Jews. Actually, I've seen more Jews there than at my
nephew's Bar Mitzvah.

You should try it. Take a rest."

"I don't want to rest. I want to work. We need to set a start-date for
Warrior."

Eppstadt's enthusiastic expression dimmed. "Oh, Christ. Is that what
this

little lunch is all about, Maxine?"

ìAre you making it or not?" Todd pressed. "Because there's plenty of
other

people who will if you won't."

"So maybe you should take it to one of them," Eppstadt said, his gaze
hooded. "You can have it in turnaround, if that's what you want. I'll
get business

affairs on it this afternoon."

"So you're really ready to let it go?" Maxine said, putting on an air of
indifference.

"Perfectly ready, if that's what Todd wants. I'm not going to stand in
the

way of you getting the picture made. You look surprised, Maxine."

"I am surprised. A package like that...it's a huge summer movie for

Paramount."

"Frankly I'm not sure this is the right time for the company to be making

that kind of picture, Maxine. It's a very hard market to read right now. And these

expensive pictures. I mean, this is going to come in at well north of a hundred

thirty million by the time we've paid for prints and advertising. I'm not sure that

makes solid fiscal sense." He tried a smile; it was lupine. "Look, Todd: I want to

be in business with you. Paramount wants to be in business with you. Christ, you've

been a gold-mine for us over the years. But there's a generation coming upóand you

know the demographics as well as I doóthese kids filling up the multiplexes, they

don't have any loyalty to the past."

Eppstadt knew what effect his words were having, and he was savoring every

last drop of it.

"You see, in the good old days, the studios were able to carry stars through

a weak patch. You had a star on a seven-year contract. He was being paid a weekly

wage. You could afford a year or two of poor performance. But you're expensive,

Todd. You're crucifyingly expensive. And I've got Viacom's shareholders to answer

to. I'm not sure they'd want to see me pay you twenty million dollars for a picture

that might only gross...what did your last picture do? Forty-one domestic? And

change?"

Maxine sighed, a little theatrically. "I'm sorry to hear that, Gary."

"Look, Maxine, I'm sorry to be having to say it. Really I am. But numbers

are numbers. If I don't believe I can make a profit, what am I doing making the

movie? You see where I'm coming from? That simply doesn't make sense."

Maxine got up from the table. "Will you excuse me a minute? I've got to make

a call."

Eppstadt caught the fire in Maxine's voice.

"No lawyers, Maxine. Please? We can do this in a civilized manner." Maxine

didn't reply. She simply stalked off between tables, snarling at a waiter who got in

her way. Eppstadt ate a couple of mouthfuls of rare tuna, then put down his fork.

"It's times like this I wish I still smoked." He sat back in his chair and looked

hard at Todd. "Don't let her start a pissing competition, Todd, because if I'm

cornered I'm going to have to stand up and tell it like it is. And then we'll all

have a mess on our hands."

"Meaning what?"

Page 30

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"Meaning..." Eppstadt looked pained; as though his proctologist was at work

on him under the chair. "You can't keep massaging numbers so your price looks

justified when we all know it isn't."

"You were saying I'd been a gold-mine for Paramount. Just two minutes ago

you said that."

"That was then. This is now. That was Keever Smotherman, this is post-Keever

Smotherman. He was the last of his breed."

"So what are you saying?"

"Well...let me tell you what I'm not saying," Eppstadt replied, his tone silky. "I'm not saying you don't have a career."

"Well that's nice to hear." Todd said sharply.

"I want to find something we can do together.

"But..."

"But?"

Eppstadt seemed to be genuinely considering his reply before he spoke.

Finally, he said: "You've got talent, Todd. And you've obviously built a loyal

fan-base over the years. What you don't have is the drawing power you had back in

the old days. It's the same with all of you really expensive boys. Cruise. Costner.

Stallone." He took a moment, then leaned closer to Todd, dropping his voice to a

conspiratorial whisper. "You want the truth? You look weary. I mean, deep down

weary." Todd said nothing. Eppstadt's observation was like being doused in ice-cold

water. "Sorry to be blunt. It's not like I'm telling you something you don't already

know."

Todd was staring at his hand, wondering what it would feel like to make a

fist and beat it against Eppstadt's face; over and over and over.

"Of course, you can have these things fixed," Gary went on chattily. "I know

a couple of guys older than you who went to see Bruce Burrows and looked ten years

younger when he was finished working on them."

Still idly contemplating his hand, Todd said: "Who's Bruce Burrows?"

"Well, in many people's opinion he's the best cosmetic surgeon in the

country. He's got an office on Wilshire. Very private. Very expensive. But you can

afford it. He does it all. Collagen replacements, lifts, peels, lipo-sculpture..."

"Who went to see him?"

"Oh, just about everybody. There's nothing to be ashamed of: it's a fact of

life. At a certain age it's harder to get the lovehandles to melt. You get

laugh-lines, you get frown lines, you get those little grooves around your mouth."

"I haven't got grooves around my mouth."

"Give it time," Eppstadt said, a touch avuncular now.

"How long does it take?"

"I don't know. I've never had any of it done. If I went in there, I'd never

get out again."

"Too much to fix."

"I think it's bad taste to jump on somebody else's self-deprecation, Todd.

But I forgive you. I know it hurts to hear this. The fact is, I don't have to have

my face out there fifty feet high. You do. That's what they're paying for." He

pointed at Todd. "That face."

"If I was to get something done..." Todd said tentatively, "about the lines,

I mean?"

"Yes?"

"Would you make Warrior then?"

He had opened the door to Eppstadt's favorite word: "Maybe. I don't know.

We'd have to see. But the way I look at it, you haven't got much to lose getting the

work done anyway. You're a heart-throb. An old-fashioned heart-throb. They want to

see you kick the shit out of the bad guy and get the girl. And they want their

heart-throb perfect." He stared at Todd. "You need to be perfect. Burrows can do

that for you. He can make you perfect again. Then you get back to being King of the

Hill. Which is what you want, I presume."

Todd admitted it with a little nod, as though it were a private vice.

"Look, I sympathize," Eppstadt went on, "I've seen a lot of people just fold

up when they lose their public. They come apart at the seams. You haven't done that.

At least not yet." He laid a hand on Todd's arm. "You go have a word with Doctor

Burrows. See what he can do for you. Six months. Then we'll talk again."

Todd didn't mention his discussion about Doctor Burrows to Maxine. He didn't

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

want the decision process muddled by her opinion. This was something he wanted to

think through for himself.

Though he didn't remember having heard of Burrows before, he was perfectly

aware he was living in the cosmetic surgery capitol of the world. Noses were fixed,

lips made fuller, crow's feet erased, ears pinned back, laugh-lines smoothed, guts

tucked, butts lifted, breasts enhanced. Just about any piece of the anatomy which

gave its owner ego problems could be improved, sometimes out of all recognition.

Traditionally of course, it had been women who were the eager and grateful

recipients of such handiwork, but that had changed. One of the eighties muscle-men,

who'd made a fortune parading a body of superhuman proportions some years before,

but had begun to lose it to gravity, had returned to the screen last year looking

more pumped than ever, his perfect abdominals and swelling pectoralsóeven his

sculpted calf muscles-surgically implanted. The healing had taken a little while,

given the extensiveness of the remodeling. He'd been out of

commission for five

monthsóhiding in Tuscany, the gossip wentówhile he mended. But it had worked. He'd

left the screen looking like a beaten-up catcher's mitt, and come back spanking new.

Todd began by making some very circuitous inquiries, the sort of questions

which he hoped would not arouse suspicion. The word came back that the procedures

were far from painless. Even legendary tough guys had ended up wishing they'd never

invited the doctors to mess with them, the process had been so agonizing. And of

course once you began, if you didn't like what you saw you had to let Burrows make

some more fixes; wounds on wounds, pain on pain.

But Todd wasn't discouraged by the news. In fact in a curious way it made

the idea of undergoing the procedures more palatable to him, playing as it did both

into his machismo side and a deep, unexplored vein of masochism.

Besides, was there any pain on God's green earth as agonizing as reading

Daily Variety and finding that once again you weren't in its pages? That other

actorsónames sometimes you'd never heard ofówere getting the scripts, the parts and

the deals that would once have dropped into your lap as a matter of

course? There

was no pain as sharp or as deep as the news of somebody else's success. If it was an

actor older than himself that was bad enough. But if it was a contemporaryóor worse,

somebody younger, somebody prettier-it made him so crazy he'd have to go pop a

tranquilizer or three to stop himself getting morose and foul-tempered. And even the

happy pills didn't work the way they had in the old days. He'd taken too many; his

body was too used to them.

So: what to do, what to do?

Should he sit on his slowly-expanding ass and start to avoid the mirror, or

take the bull by the horns and get an appointment with Doctor Burrows?

He remained undecided for about a week. And then one evening, sitting at

home alone nursing a drink and flipping the channels of his sixty-inch TV, he came

upon a segment from the telecast of last year's Oscar ceremony. A young actor, whom

he knew for a fact was not one of the smartest bunnies in town, was receiving his

third Oscar of the night, for a picture he hadóat least according to the

creditsówritten, directed and starred in. The latter? Well there was no disputing

that. He was in every other frame of the damn picture, back-lit and golden. He was

playing a stuttering, mentally unstable poor boy from the Deep South, a role which

he claimed he had based on the life of his father's brother, who had died tragically

at the hands of a lynch mob that had mistaken him for a rapist. It was all perfect

Oscar-fodder: the ambitious young artist bucking the star system to tell a tale of

the human spirit, rooted in his own family history.

Except that the truth was neither so moving nor so magical. Far from having

been lynched, the 'dead' uncle was still very much alive, (or so gossip around town

went) having spent twenty-two years in jail for a rape that he did not to this day

contest. He had received a healthy pay-back from the studio that released the

picture to stay conveniently quiet, so that his story could be told the Hollywood

way, leaving the Golden Boy with his ten-thousand-watt smile to walk off with three

Oscars for his mantelpiece. Todd had it on good authority that his directorial

skills extended no further than knowing where his Winnebago was parked.

He wasn't the only one aspiring to snatch Todd's throne. There were plenty

of others, chirpy little cock-suckers swarming out of the woodwork to play the King

of Hollywood, when Todd had yet to vacate the role.

Well fuck ěem. He'd knock them off their stolen pedestals, the sons of bitches. He'd have the limelight back in a heartbeatóall that glory, all that

loveóand they'd be back on the casting couch in a week with their fannies in the

Page 32

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

air.

So what if it cost him a few weeks of discomfort? It would be worth it just

to see the expressions on their pretty little faces when they realized they'd got

greedy a decade too early.

Contrary to recent opinions, the King of the Heart-throbs was not dead. He

was coming home, and he was going to look like a million dollars.

FOUR

On the day Todd had booked to see Burrows for a first consultation, he had

to cancel at the last minute.

"You're not going to believe my excuse," he told the receptionist, "But I swear it's the truth."

"Go on."

"My dog's sick."

"Well that's not one we hear very often. So, gold star for originality."

The fact was that Dempsey, his mutt, was not looking too good that morning;

he'd got up to go out into the back yard for his morning piss and he'd stumbled, as

though one of his legs was numb. Todd went down to see if he was okay. He wasn't.

Though he still put on a happy face for his boss, his expression looked strangely

dislocated, as though he was having difficulty focusing on Todd.

"What's wrong with you, boy?"

Todd went down on his haunches in front of the dog, and stroked his ears.

Dempsey growled appreciatively. But he felt unsteady in Todd's arms; as though at

any moment he might keel over.

Todd called Maxine and told her he'd be at the vet's for the next few hours.

"Something wrong with that flatulent old dog of yours?"

"You'll be flatulent when you get to his age," Todd said. "And yeah. There

is something wrong. He keeps falling over."

He'd had Dempsey eleven years. He'd bought the dog as a pup just before he'd

started to shoot Gunner. As a consequence the dog's first real experience of life

beyond his mother's teat was being carried around a movie studio by his owner and

adored; all of which he thereafter took as his God-given right. Dempsey had been

with Todd on every set since; the two were inseparable. Todd and Dempsey; Dempsey

and Todd. Thanks to those early experiences of universal affection he was a

confident dog; afraid of nobody, and unless somebody was afraid of him predisposed

to be friendly.

The vet's name was Doctor Spenser; an ebullient black woman who'd been

looking after Dempsey since puppyhood. She did a few tests and told Todd that yes,

there were definitive signs that Dempsey was having cognitive difficulties.

"How old is he now?"

"He'll be twelve next March."

"Oh that's right we didn't know his birthday so we said"

"Oscar Night."

"What's wrong, boy?" Doctor Spenser said to Dempsey, ruffling him under the

chin. "He's certainly not his usual happy self, is he?"

"Nope."

"Well, I'd like to keep him in here for a few tests."

"I brought a stool sample like you asked."

"Thanks."

Todd produced a small Tupperware container of dog poop. "Well we'll have

that analyzed. You want the container back? Just kidding. Don't look so grim, Toddó"

"I don't like seeing him like this."

"It's probably a virus he's picked up. We'll give him a few antibiotics and

he'll be good as new."

"But there's something weird about his eyes. Look. He's not even focusing on

us."

Dempsey had raised his head, knowing full well he was being talked about,

but plainly he was having some difficulty fixing his gaze on whoever was doing the

talking.

"This couldn't just be old age, could it?"

"I doubt it. He's been a very healthy dog so far, and it's my experience

Page 33

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

that a mutt like Dempsey is going to last a lot longer than some over-bred hound.

You leave him with me. Check in with me at the end of the day."

Todd did that. The news was there was no news. The stool sample had gone to

the lab to be analyzed, and meanwhile Dempsey was looking weak, perhaps a little

disorientated, but there'd been no noticeable deterioration in his condition.

"You can either take him home tonight or leave him here. He'll be perfectly

fine here. We don't actually have anybody monitoring the dogs from eleven pm till

six in the morning, but the chances ofó"

"I'm going to come and collect him."

Despite Spenser's reassurances that there had been no deterioration, Todd

disagreed. Usually when he arrived at the vet's after Dempsey had stayed in for a

couple of hours, either for a shot, or his six-month checkup, he was greeted by the

dog in crazy mode, yapping his delight at seeing his boss again, and ready to be out

of the door before they could stick another damn needle in his backside. But today,

when Dempsey came round the corner it seemed to take a moment before the dog even

realized it was his master at the door, calling to him. And when he came, though

some of his old enthusiasm returned, he was a shadow of his former

self. Doctor

Spenser had already gone off-duty for the night. Todd asked if he could have her

home number, but there were some things, it seemed, even being Todd Pickett couldn't

get you.

"She's got kids to take care of," the male nurse said. "She likes to keep this place and her home-life very separate."

"But if there's an emergency?"

"I'd recommend going to the twenty-four-hour animal hospital on Sepulveda.

There'll be doctors there all night if anything were to happen. But honestly, I

think it's some virus he's picked up out at the dog park, and it'll just take a

course of antibiotics."

"Well can I take some antibiotics then?" Todd said, getting a little irritated with the casual way Dempsey's case was being treated.

"Doctor Spenser doesn't want to give Dempsey anything till she's got some

results from the stool sample, so I'm afraid there'll be no drugs for Dempsey until

tomorrow."

Dempsey didn't eat. He just looked at the bowl of food Marco had prepared

for him, and turned up his nose at it.

Then he went to lie on the back step and stayed there for the rest of the

evening.

In the middle of the night Todd was woken by what sounded like the effects

track from The Exorcist, a stomach-wrenching series of mumblings and eruptions. He

switched on the bedroom light to find Dempsey at the bottom of his bed, standing in

a pool of bright yellow puke. He looked horribly ashamed of having made a mess, and

at first wouldn't come to Todd to be petted, but when he did and Todd had his arms

around the dog it was clear he was in a bad way. Dempsey's whole body was cold, and

he was trembling violently.

"Come on, m'man," he said. "We're gonna take you to get some proper doctoring."

The noise had woken Marco, who got dressed to drive while Todd held onto

Dempsey, who was wrapped in his favorite comforter, a quilt Todd's grandmother had

made for her grandson. The dog lay sprawled over Todd's knee, all one hundred pounds

of him, while Marco drove through the almost empty streets to Sepulveda.

It was five minutes after five in the morning when they arrived at the

animal hospital, and there were just two people waiting with their pets to be

helped. Even so it took twenty-five minutes before a doctor could be freed up to see

Dempsey, during which time it seemed to Todd that Dempsey's condition worsened. His

shaking became more violent than ever, and in the midst of one of his spasms, he

convulsively shat brown gruel, mostly on the floor, but on Todd's leg and shoe too.

"Well now," said the night doctor brightly, "what seems to be the trouble?"

Todd gave him an exhaustive run-down on the events of the last day. He then

asked Todd to pick Dempsey up and put him on the examination tableóchoosing this

particular instant to remark what a fan of Todd's he was, as though Todd could have

given a damn at that moment.

Then he examined the dog, in a good and thorough manner, but making asides

throughout as to which movies of Todd's he and his wife had particularly enjoyed and

which they hadn't. After about five minutes of this, seeing the expression of

Page 34

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

despair and anger on Todd's face, Marco quietly mentioned that Mr.

Pickett was

really only interested right now in the health of his dog. The doctor's mouth

tightened, as though he'd just been badly offended, and his handling of Dempsey (at

least to Todd's eyes) seemed to become a little more brusque.

"Well, you have a very sick dog," he said at the end of the examination, not

even looking at Todd but talking to Marco. He was plainly embarrassed by his earlier

show of fanboy enthusiasm, and was now over-compensating for it wildly.

Todd went to sit on the examination table to cradle Dempsey, which put him

right in the doctor's line of sight.

"Look," he said quietly, "I'm sorry if I'm not being quite as appreciative

of...your support of my pictures as I would normally be, Doc. It's nothing personal.

I'm sure we could have a great conversation about it under different circumstances.

But I'd like Dempsey comfortable first. He's sick and I want him better."

Finally the doctor managed a little smile, and when he spoke his voice had

also quieted, matching Todd's. "I'm going to put Dempsey on a saline drip, because

he's obviously lost a lot of fluids in the last twelve to twenty-four hours. That

should make him feel a whole lot happier. Meanwhile, you said Dr. Spencer over at

Robertson VGA was doing stool checks?" "She said it could be a virus."

"Well...maybe. But looking at his eyes, it seems more systemic to me. If he

were a younger dog I'd say parvo or heartworm, which is a parasite. But again, we

commonly see toxo in pound dogs or strays, and I'm sure he's had his heartworm

medications. Anyway, we'll see from the stool results tomorrow."

"Wait, wait. You're saying it could be parvo or heartworm, but you don't

really think it's either of these?"

"No."

"So what do you think it is?"

The doctor shook his head. "I'd say there's a better than fifty-fifty chance

he's got some kind of tumor. On the brain or on the brain-stem."

"And if he has?"

"Well, it's like a human being. You can sometimes fix these thingsó"

At this juncture, as though to demonstrate that things were not in a very

fixable state right now, Dempsey started to shudder in Todd's arms, his claws

scrabbling against the metal table as he tried to stay upright.

"It's okay, boy! It's okay!"

The doctor went for a nurse, and came back with an injection.

"What's that for?"

"Just to calm him down a little, so he can get some sleep."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure. It's a mild tranquilizer. If you don't want me to give it to

the dog, Mr. Pickett..."

"Yes. Yes, give it to him."

The injection did indeed subdue Dempsey's little fit. They wheeled him away

into another room to be given an intravenous infusion, leaving Todd with the quilt.

"Damn dog," he said, now Dempsey was out of earshot, "More trouble than he's

worth." Tears very close.

"Why don't we get a cup of coffee?" Marco suggested, "And we can talk to the

doctor more when we get back?"

There was a little donut shop in the mini-mall at the top of Sepulveda, and

it had just opened. They were the first customers of the day. Todd knew the instant

he walked in that both the women serving recognized him, so he turned round and

walked out again rather than risking getting caught in a conversation: Marco brought

out two coffees and two Bear Claws in greaseproof paper, still warm from the oven.

Though he hadn't thought he had an appetite, the pastry was too good not to be

eaten; so he ate. Then, coffee in hand, they walked down to the hospital, the eyes

of the women in the donut shop glued to Todd until he had disappeared from sight.

They said nothing as they walked. The day was getting underway; the traffic

on Sepulveda backing up as it waited to take its turn to get onto the freeway. These

were people with two-hour commutes ahead of them before they got to their place of

work; people with jobs they hated, houses they hated, and a paycheck at the end of

the month that wouldn't even cover the cost of the mortgage, the car payments, the

insurance.

"Right now," Todd said, "I'd give my eye teeth to be one of them, instead of

Page 35

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

having to go back in there."

"I can go in for you."

"No."

"Dempsey trusts me," Marco said.

"I know. But he's my dog."

FIVE

Again, there was no news. Dempsey had been hooked up to a saline drip, and

looked as though the tranquilizer had taken its effect. He wasn't quite asleep, but

he was dazy.

"We'll do an X-ray today, and see how he looks." The doctor said, "We should

have the results back by the end of the day. So why don't you two go home, we'll

keep Dempsey here and see what we can do to get him well?"

"I want to stay."

"Well that's going to be very uncomfortable for you, Mr. Pickett. We don't

have a room we can put you in, and frankly you both look as though you didn't get a

full night's sleep. Dempsey's mildly sedated, and we'll probably keep him that way.

But it's going to be six or seven hours before we get any answers for you. We share

our X-ray technician with our hospital in Santa Monica, so she won't even be in to

look at Dempsey until eleven at the earliest."

"I still want to stay. You've got a bench out there. You're not going to throw me out if I sit on that are you?"

"No. Of course not."

"Then that's where I'll be."

The doctor looked at his watch. "I'll be out of here in half an hour and the

day-doctor, Doctor Otis, will be taking over Dempsey's case. I will of course bring

him up to speed with everything we've done so far and if she feels there's something

else she wants to tryó"

"She'll know where to find me."

"Right."

The doctor gave up a wan smile, his second and last of the night.

"Well, I

sincerely hope you have good news with Dempsey, and that by the time I come in again

tonight you've both gone home happy."

Todd would not be dissuaded from staying on the bench, even though it was

situated a few steps away from the front counter, next to the soda machine, and

would leave him in full view of everyone who came through the next few hours. Marco

said that he would come back with a Thermos of good coffee and something to eat, and

left Todd there.

The parade of the needy began early. About two minutes after Marco had gone

a distraught woman came in saying that she'd struck a cat with her car, and the

victim was now in her car, alive, but terrified and badly hurt. Two nurses went out

with well-used pairs of leather gloves and a syringe of tranquilizer to subdue the

victim. They came back with a weeping woman and a corpse. The animal's panicked

self-defenses had apparently used up what little energies its broken body had

possessed. The woman was inconsolable. She tried to thank the nurses for their help

but all she could do was cry. There were six more accidents that rush hour, two of

them fatalities. Todd watched all this in a dazed state. Lack of sleep was beginning

to catch up with him. Every now and then his eyes would flicker closed for a few

seconds, and the scene in front of him would jump, like a piece of film which had

had a few seconds' worth of action removed and then been spliced back together

again. People moved abruptly from one place to another. One moment somebody was

coming in, the next they were engaged in conversation (often tearful, sometimes

accusatory, always intense), with one of the nurses; the next they'd gone, or they

were on their way out.

Much to his surprise, nobody gave him more than a cursory glance.
Perhaps,

they thought, that can't possibly be Todd Pickett, sitting on a broken-down old

bench next to a broken down old soda machine in a twenty-four-hour animal hospital.

Or perhaps it was just that they saw him, recognized him, and didn't care. They had

other things to think about right now, more pressing than the peculiar presence of a

weary-looking movie star on a broken down bench. They had a rat with an abscess, a

cat that had had six kittens but had got the seventh stuck, a guinea pig in a shoe

Page 36

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

box that was dead when the box was opened; a poodle that kept biting itself; a

problem with fleas, a problem with mange, two canaries that hated one another, and

so on and so forth.

Marco came back with coffee and sandwiches. Todd drank some coffee, which

perked him up.

He went to the front desk and asked, not for the first time, to see the

day-doctor. This time, he got lucky. Doctor Otis, a pale and slight young woman who

looked no more than eighteen, and refused to look Todd in the face (though this, he

realized was her general practice: she was the same with Marco and with the nurses,

eyes constantly averted), appeared and said that there was nothing to report except

that Dempsey would be going for x-rays in about half an hour, and they would be

available for viewing tomorrow. At this point, Todd lost his temper. It happened

rarely, but when it did it was an impressive spectacle. His neck became blotchy-red,

and the muscles of his face churned; his eyes went to ice-water.

"I brought my dog in here at five o'clock this morning. I've been waiting

hereó sitting on that benchó that bench right there, you see it? Do you see that

bench?"

"Yes, Ió"

"That's where I've been since six o'clock. It is now almost eleven o'clock.

I've asked on several occasions for you to have the common decency to come out and

tell me what's happening to my dog. Always politely. And I've been told, over and

over again, that you're very busy."

"It's been a crazy morning, Mró?"

"Pickett is my name."

"Well, Mr. Pickett, I'm afraid I can'tó"

"Stop right there. Don't say you can't get the X-rays until tomorrow because

you can. You will. I want my dog looked after and if you won't do it I'll take him

some place where he can be taken care of and I'll make sure every damn newspaper in

the State of Californiaó"

At this moment an older woman, obviously the hospital manager, stepped into

view and took Todd's hand, shaking it. "Mr. Pickett. My name's Cordelia Simpson.

It's all right, Andrea, I'll take care of Mr. Pickett from here."

The young woman doctor retreated. She was two shades whiter than she'd been

at the beginning of the conversation.

"I heard most of what you were telling Andreaó"

"Look, I'm sorry. That's not my style. I don't like losing my temper, butó"

"No, it's okay. I understand. You're tired and you're concerned aboutó?"

"Dempsey."

"Dempsey. Right."

"I was told he'd be X-rayed today and we'd have the results back this afternoon."

"Well, the speed of these things all depends on the volume of work, Mr.

Pickett," Cordelia said. She was English, and had the face and manner of a woman who

would not be pleasant if she were riled, but was doing her best right now to put on

a gentler face. "I read a piece about you in the LA Times last year. You were on the

cover with Dempsey, as I remember. Clearly you're very close to your dog. Here's

what I'm going to do." She consulted her watch. "Dempsey is being seen by the

radiographer right now, and I guarantee that we'll have the results back by...six.

It might be earlier but I think six we can guarantee."

"So how long before I can take him home?"

"You want to take him now?"

"Yes."

"You'll find him rather dopey. I'm not sure he could walk."

"I can carry him."

Cordelia nodded. She knew an immovable object when she saw one. "Well I'll

have one of the nurses come fetch you when he's ready. Is that his?"

She pointed to the quilt on the bench. Quite unconsciously, Todd had been

nursing it while he waited. No wonder people had kept their distance.

"Yes."

"Do you want me to have him wrapped up in it?"

"Thank you."

Cordelia picked up the quilt. "And my apologies, Mr. Pickett, for any difficulties you may have had. Our doctors are horribly overworked. And, I'm afraid

to say, often people who are wonderful with animals aren't always terribly good with

Page 37

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

human beings."

Ten minutes later a burly Latino appeared with a sleepy-eyed Dempsey,

wrapped in his quilt. His ears pricked up just a little at the sight of Todd, enough

for Todd to know that his holding the dog, and whispering to him, meant something.

"We're going home, old guy," Todd murmured to him, as he carried him down

the steps into the street and round to the little parking lot behind the building,

where Marco was backing out the car. "I know you didn't like it in there. All those

people you didn't know with needles and shit. Well, fuck them." He put his nose into

the cushion of baby fur behind Dempsey's ear, which always smelled sweetest. "We're

going home."

For the next few hours Dempsey slept in the quilt, which Todd had put on his

big bed. Todd stayed beside him, though the need for sleep caught up with him

several times, and he'd slide away into a few minutes of dreamland: fragments of

things he'd seen from his bench in the waiting room, mostly. The box containing the

dead guinea pig, that absurd poo,dle, nipping its own backside bloody; all just

pieces of the day, coming and going. Then he'd wake and stroke Dempsey for a little

while, talk to him, tell him everything was going to be okay.

There was a sudden rally in Dempsey's energies about four o'clock, which was

when he was usually fed, so Todd had Marco prepare a sick-bed version of his usual

meal, with chicken instead of the chopped horse-flesh or whatever the hell it was in

the cans, and some good gravy. Dempsey ate it all, though he had to be held up to do

so, since his legs were unreliable. He then drank a full bowl of water.

"Good, good," Todd said.

Dempsey attempted to wag his tail, but it had no more power in it than his

legs had.

Todd carried him outside so he could shit and piss. A slight drizzle was

coming down; not cool, but refreshing. He held onto the dog, waiting for the urge to

take Dempsey, and he turned his face up to the rain, offering a quiet little prayer.

"Please don't take him from me. He's just a smelly old dog. You don't need

him and I do. Do you hear me? Please...hear me. Don't take him."

He looked back at Dempsey to find that the dog was looking back at him,

apparently paying attention to every word. His ears were half-pricked, his eyes

half-open.

"Do you think anyone's listening?" Todd said.

By way of reply, Dempsey looked away from him, his head bobbing uneasily on

his neck. Then he made a nasty sound deep in his belly and his whole body convulsed.

Todd had never seen the term projectile vomit displayed with such force. A stream of

chewed chicken, dog mix and water squirted out. As soon as it stopped, the dog began

to make little whining sounds. Then ten seconds later, Dempsey repeated the whole

spectacle, until every piece of nourishment and every drop of water he'd been given

had been comprehensively ejected.

After the second burst of vomiting he didn't even have the strength to whine. Todd wrapped the quilt around him and carried him back into the house. He had

Marco bring some towels and dried him off where the rain had caught him.

"I don't suppose you care what's been going on all day, do you?" Marco said.

"Anything important?"

"Great foreign numbers on Gallows, particularly in France. Huge hit in

France, apparently. Maxine wants to know if you'd like to do a piece about Dempsey's

health crisis for one of the woman's magazines."

"No."

"That's what I told her. She said they'd eat it up, but I saidó"

"No! Fuck. Will these people never stop? No!"

"You got a call from Walter at Dreamworks about some charity thing he's

arranging, I told him you'd be back in circulation tomorrow."

"That's the phone."

"Yeah. It is."

Marco went to the nearest phone, which was in the master bathroom, while

Todd went back to finish drying the dog.

"It's Andrea Otis. From the hospital. I think it's the nervous young woman

you saw this morning."

"Stay with him," Todd said to Marco.

He went into the bathroom, which was cold. Picked up the phone.

Page 38

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"Mr. Pickett?"

"Yes."

"First, I want to say I owe you an apology for this morningó"

"No that's fine."

"I knew who you were and that threw me offó"

"Dempsey."

"óa little. I'm sorry."

"Dempsey."

"Yes. Well, we've got the X-ray results back and...I'm afraid the news isn't

very good."

"Why not? What's wrong with him?"

"He is riddled with cancer."

Todd took a long moment to digest this unwelcome news. Then he said: "That's

impossible."

"It's in his spine. It's in his colonó"

"But that can't be."

And it's now spreading to his brain, which is why we've only just discovered it. These motor and perception problems he's having are all part of the same thing. The tumor's spreading into his skull, and pushing on his brain."

"Oh God."

"So...I don't know what you want to do."

"I want this not to be happening."

"Well yes. But I'm afraid it is."

"How long has he got?"

"His present condition is really as good as things are going to get for him." She spoke as though she was reading the words from an idiot-board, careful to

leave exactly the same amount of space between each one. "All that is really at

issue is how quickly Dempsey becomes incapacitated."

Todd looked through the open door at the pitiful shape shuddering beneath

the quilt. It was obvious that Dempsey had already reached that point. Todd could be

absurdly optimistic at times, but this wasn't one of them.

"Is he in pain?" he asked the doctor.

"Well, I'd say it's not so much pain we're dealing with as anxiety. He doesn't know what's happening to him. And he doesn't know why it's happening. He's

just suffering, Mr. Pickett. And it's just going to get worse."

"So you're saying I should have him put down?"

"It's not my place to tell you what to do with your dog, Mr. Pickett."

"But if he was your dog."

"If he was my dog, and I loved him as you obviously love Dempsey, I wouldn't

want him suffering...Mr. Pickett, are you there?"

"Here," Todd said, trying to keep the sound of tears out of his voice.

"So really it's up to you."

Todd looked at Dempsey again, who was making a mournful sound in his sleep.

"If I bring him back over to the hospital?"

"Yes?"

"Would there be somebody there to put him to sleep?"

"Yes, of course. I'll be here."

"Then that's what I want to do."

"I'm so very sorry, Mr. Pickett."

"It's not your fault."

Dempsey roused himself a little when Todd went back to bed, but it was

barely more than a sniff and a half-hearted wag.

"Come on, you," he said, wrapping Dempsey tightly in the quilt, and lifting

him up, "the sooner this is done the sooner you're not an unhappy

hound. Will you

drive, Marco?"

It was four-thirty in the afternoon, and though the drizzle had ceased, die

traffic was still horrendous. It took them fifty-five minutes to get down to the

hospital, but this timeóperhaps to make up for her unavailability the last time he'd

been thereóDoctor Otis was at the counter waiting for him. She opened the side door,

to let him into die non-public area.

"You want me to come in, boss?" Marco asked.

"Nah, it's okay. We'll be fine."

Page 39

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"He looks really out of it," the doctor remarked.

Dempsey had barely opened his eyes at the sound of Todd's voice. "You know,

I realize this may seem like a strange thing to say, but in a way we're lucky that

this caught him so fast. With some dogs it takes weeks and months..."

"In here?" Todd said.

"Yes."

The doctor had opened a door into a room not more than eight by eight,

painted in what was intended to be a soothing green. On one wall was a Monet

reproduction and on another a piece of poetry that Todd couldn't read through his

assembling tears.

"I'll just give you two some time," Doctor Otis said. "I'll be back in a few

minutes."

Todd sat down with Dempsey in his arms. Damn," he said softly. "This isn't

fair."

Dempsey had opened his eyes fully for the first time in several hours,

probably because he'd heard the sound of Todd crying, which had always made him very

attentive, even if the crying was fake. Todd could be rehearsing a sad scene from a

picture, memorizing lines, and as soon as the first note of sadness crept into his

voice Dempsey would be there, his paws on Todd's knees, ready to give comfort. But

this time the animal didn't have the strength to help make the boss feel better. All

he could do was stare up at Todd with a slight look of puzzlement on his face.

"Oh God, I hope I'm doing the right thing. I wish you could just tell me

that this is what you want." Todd kissed the dog, tears falling in Dempsey's fur. "I

know if I was you I wouldn't want to be shitting everywhere and not able to stand

up. That's no life, huh?" He buried his face in the smell of the animal. For eleven

yearsówhether Todd had had female company or notóDempsey had slept on his bed; and

more often than not been the one to wake him up, pressing his cold nose against

Todd's face, rubbing his neck on Todd's chest.

"I love you, dog," he said. "And I want you to be there when I get to heaven, okay? I want you to be keeping a place for me. Will you do that? Will you

keep a place for me?"

There was a discreet knock on the door, and Todd's stomach turned. "Time's

up, buddy," he said, kissing Dempsey's burning hot snout. Even now, he thought, I

could say no, I don't want you to do this. He could take Dempsey home for one more

night in the big bed. But that was just selfishness. The dog had had enough, that

was plain. He could barely raise his head. It was time to go. "Come in," he said.

The doctor came in, meeting Todd's gaze for the first time. "I know how hard

this is," she said. "I have dogs myself, all mutts like Dempsey."

"Dempsey, did you hear that?" Todd said, the tears refusing to abate. "She

called you a mutt."

"They're the best."

"Yeah. They are."

"Are you ready?"

Todd nodded, at which point she instantly transferred her loving attention

to the dog. She lifted Dempsey out from Todd's arms and put him on the steel table

in the corner of the room, talking to him all the while, "Hey there, Dempsey. This

isn't going to hurt at all. Just a little prickó"

She pulled a syringe out of her pocket, and exposed the needle. At the back

of Todd's head that same irrational voice was screaming: "Tell her no! Knock it out

of her hand! Quickly! Quickly!" He pushed the thoughts away, wiping the tears from

his eyes with the back of his hand, because he didn't want to be blinded by them

when this happened. He wanted to see it all, even if it hurt like a knife. He owed

that to Dempsey. He put his hand on Dempsey's neck and rubbed his favorite place.

The syringe went into Dempsey's leg. He made a tiny little grunt of complaint.

"Good boy," Doctor Otis said. "There. That wasn't so bad now, was it?"

Todd kept rubbing Dempsey's neck.

The doctor put the top back on the syringe and pocketed it. "It's all right," she said. "You can stop rubbing. He's gone."

So quickly? Todd cleared away another wave of tears and looked down at the

body on the table. Dempsey's eye was still half-open, but it didn't look back at him

any longer. Where there'd been a sliver of bright life, where there'd been mischief

and shared ritualsówhere, in short, there'd been Dempseyóthere was nothing.

"I'm very sorry, Mr. Pickett," the doctor said, "I'm sure you loved him very

much and speaking as a doctor, I know you did the right thing for him."

Page 40

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

Todd sniffed hard, and reached over to pluck a clump of paper handkerchiefs

from the box. "What does that say?" he said, pointing to the framed poster on the

wall. His tears made it incomprehensible.

"It's a quote by Robert Louis Stevenson," Andrea said, "You know, who wrote

Treasure Island?"

"Yeah, I know..."

"It says: 'Do you think dogs will not be in heaven? I tell you, they will be

there long before any of us."

SIX

He waited until he got home, and he'd governed his tears, to make arrangements for Dempsey's cremation. He left a message with a firm that was

recommended by the Animal Hospital for their discreet handling of these matters.

They would pick Dempsey's body up from the Hospital Mortuary, cremate him and

transfer his ashes, guaranteeing that there was no mingling of cremains as they

described them but that the ashes they delivered to the owner would be those of

their pet. In other words they weren't putting canaries, parrots, rats, dogs and

guinea-pigs in the oven for one big bonfire and dividing up the 'cremains' (the word

revolted Todd) in what looked to be the appropriate amounts. He also called his

accountant at home and made arrangements for a ten thousand dollar donation to the

Hospital, the only attendant request being that five hundred of that money be spent

on putting in a more comfortable bench for people to sit on while they waited.

He slept very well with the aid of several Ambien and a large scotch, until

about four thirty in the morning when he woke up and felt Dempsey

moving around at

the bottom of the bed. The drugs made his thought processes muddy.
It took him a few

seconds of leaning over and putting the coverlet at the bottom of the
bed to bring

his consciousness up to speed. Dempsey wasn't there.

Yet he'd felt the dog, he would have sworn to it on a stack of Bibles,

getting up and walking around and around on the same spot, padding
down the bed

until it was comfortable for him.

He lay back on the pillow and drifted back to sleep, but it wasn't a
healthy

sleep thereafter. He kept half-waking, and staring down at the
darkness of the

bottom of the bed, wondering if Dempsey was a ghost now, and would
haunt his heels

until the dog had the sense to go on his way to heaven.

He slept in until ten, when Marco brought him the phone with a
woman called

Rosalie from the Pet Cremation Service. She was pleasant in her no-
nonsense way; no

doubt she often had people in near hysteria at the other end of the
telephone, so a

little professional distance was necessary. She had already been in
contact with the

Hospital this morning, she said, and they had informed her that
Dempsey had a collar

and quilt with him. Did Todd want these items returned, or were they to be cremated

with his pet?

"They were his," Todd said, "so they should go with him."

"Fine." said Rosalie. "Then the only other question is the matter of the urn. We have three varietiesó"

"Just the best you've got."

"That would be our Bronze Grecian Style."

"That sounds fine."

ìAll I need now is your credit card number."

"I'll pass you back to my assistant. He can help you with all that."

"Just one other question?"

"Yes."

ìAre you...the Todd Pickett?"

Yes, of course, he was the real Todd Pickett. But he didn't feel like the real thing; more like a badly bruised lookalike. Things like this didn't happen to

the real Todd Pickett. He had a way with life that always made it show the bright

side.

He went back to sleep until noon then got up and ate some lunch, his body

aching as though he was catching a heavy dose of the flu. His food unfinished he sat

in the breakfast nook, staring blankly at the potted plants artfully arranged on the

patio; plants he'd never persuaded Dempsey not to cock his leg against every time he

passed.

Page 41

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"I'm going back to bed," he told Marco.

"You don't want to put a holding call into Maxine? She's called nine times

this morning. She says she has news about a foreign buyer for Warrior."

"Did you tell her what happened to Dempsey?"

"Yes."

"What did she say?"

"She said: oh. Then she went back to talking about the buyer."

Todd sighed, defeated by the woman's incomprehension. "Maybe it's time I got

out of this fucking business," he said to Marco. "I don't have the balls for it any

longer. Or the energy."

Marco put up no protest at this. He hated everything about the business,

except Todd, and always had. "Why don't we go down to Key West like we always

promised ourselves? Open a bar. Get fat and drunkó"

"óand die of heart attacks at fifty."

"You're feeling morbid right now."

"A little."

"Well it won't last forever. And one of these days, we'll have to honour Dempsey and get another dog."

"That wouldn't be honouring him, that'd be replacing him. And he was irreplaceable. You know why?"

"Why?"

"Because he was there when I was nobody."

"You were pups together."

This got a smile out of Todd; the first in forty-eight hours. "Yeah..." he said, his voice close to breaking again. "We were pups together." He tried to hold

back the tears, but they came anyway. "What is wrong with me?" he said. "He was a

dog. I mean...come on. Tell me honestly, do you think Tom Cruise cries for a day if

one of his dogs dies?"

"I don't think he's got dogs."

"Or Brad Pitt?"

"I don't know. Ask 'em. Next time you see 'em, ask 'em."

"Oh sure, that's going to make a dandy little scene. Todd Pickett and Brad

Pitt: "Tell me, Brad, when your dog died did you wail like a girl for

two days?"

Now it was Marco who laughed. "Wail like a girl?"

"That's how I feel. I feel like I'm in the middle of some stupid weepie."

"Maybe you should call Wilhemina over and fuck her."

"Wilhemina doesn't do fucks. She does lovemaking with candles and a lot of

wash-clothes. I swear she drinks I'm going to give her something."

"Fleas?"

"Yeah. Fleas. You know, as a last act of rebellion on behalf of Dempsey and

myself I'd like to give fleas to Wilhemina, Maxine andó"

"Gary Eppstadt."

Both men were laughing now, curing the hurt the only way it could be cured,

by being included in the nature of things.

Speaking of inclusion, he got a call from his mother, about six o'clock. She

was at home in Cambridge Massachusetts, but sounded ready to jump the first plane

and come visit. She was in one of her 'I've a funny feeling' moods.

"What's going on?"

"Nothing."

"Yes there is."

She was inevitably right; she could predict with startling accuracy the

times she needed to call her famous son and the times when she should keep her

distance. Sometimes he could lie to her, and get away with it. But today wasn't one

of those days. What was the point?

"Dempsey's dead."

"That old mutt of yours."

"He was not an old mutt and if you talk about him like that then this conversation ends right here."

"How old was he?" Patricia asked.

"Eleven, going on twelve."

"That's a decent age."

"Not for a dog like him."

"What kind of dog would that be?"

Page 42

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"You knowó"

"A mutt. Mutt's always live longer than thoroughbreds. That's a fact of life

"Well, mine didn't."

"Too much rich food. You used to spoil that dogó"

"Is there anything else you want besides lecturing me about how I killed my

dog with kindness?"

"No. I was just wanting to chat, but obviously you're in no mood to chat."

"I loved Dempsey, Mom. You understand what I'm saying?"

"If you don't mind me observing somethingó"

"Could I stop you?"

"óit's sad that the only serious relationship you've had is with a dog. It's

time you grew up, Todd. You're not getting any younger, you know. You think about

the way your father aged."

"I don't want to talk about this right now, okay."

"Listen to me."

"Mom. I don'tó"

"You've got his genes, so listen for once will you? He was a good-looking

man your father, till he was about thirty-four, thirty-five. Now granted he didn't

take care of himself and you doóI mean he smoked and he drank a lot more than was

good for him. But his looks went practically overnight."

"Overnight? That's is ridiculous. Nobody's looks goó"

ìAll right, it wasn't overnight. But I was there. I saw. Believe me, it was

quick. Five, six months and all his looks had gone."

Even though this was an absurd exaggeration, there was an element of truth

in what Patricia Pickett was saying. Todd's father had indeed lost his looks with

remarkable speed. It would not have been the kind of thing a son would have noticed,

necessarily, but Todd had a second point-of-view on his father's sudden

deterioration: his best friend Danny had been raised by a single mother who'd

several times made her feelings for Merrick Pickett known to her son. The rumors had

reached Todd, of course. Indeed they'd become practically weekly reports, as Danny's

mother's plans to seduce the unwitting subject of her desires were laid (and failed)

and re-laid.

All this came back to Todd as his mother went on chatting. Eventually, he

said, "Mom, I've got to go. I've got to make some decisions about the cremation."

"Oh, Lord, I hope you're keeping this quiet. The media would have a party

with this: you and your dog."

"Well all the more reason for you to clam up about it," he warned. "If anybody calls, saying they want a quote."

"I know nothing."

"You know nothing."

"I know the routine by now, honey. Don't worry, your secret's safe

with me."

"Don't even tell the neighbours."

"Fine! I won't."

"Bye, Mom."

"I'm sorry about Brewster."

"Dempsey."

"Whatever."

It was true; when Todd gave the subject some serious thought:
Merrick

Pickett had indeed lost his looks with startling speed. One day he'd
been the best

looking insurance agent in the city of Cincinnati, the next (it seemed)
Danny's

mother wouldn't look twice at him. Suppose this was hereditary?
Suppose fifty

percent of it was hereditary?

He called Eppstadt's office. It took the sonofabitch forty-eight minutes
to

return the call and when he did his manner was brusque.

"I hope this isn't about Warrior?"

"It isn't."

"We're not going to do it, Todd."

"I get it, Gary. Is your assistant listening in on this conversation?"

"No. What do you want?"

"When we had lunch you recommended a guy who'd done some work for a few

famous names."

"Bruce Burrows?"

"How do I get hold of him? He's not in the book."

Page 43

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"Don't worry. I'll hook you up."

"Thanks."

"You're making a good call, Todd. I hope we can get back in business as soon

as you're healed."

Once he had the number, Todd didn't leave himself further room for

hesitation. He called Burrows, booked the consultation, and tentatively chatted over

some dates for the operation.

There was one of piece outstanding business before he could move on: the

disposal of Dempsey's ashes. Despite the reassurances of Robert Louis Stevenson,

Todd did not have any clear idea as to the permanence of any soul, whether animal or

human. He only knew that he wanted Dempsey's mortal remains to be placed where the

dog had been most happy. There was no doubt about where that was: the backyard of

the Bel Air house, which had been, since his puppyhood, Dempsey's unchallenged

territory: his stalking ground, his schoolyard when it came to learning new tricks.

And it was there, the evening before Todd put himself into the hands of Bruce

Burrows, that he took the bronzed plastic urn provided by the Cremation Company out

into the yard. The urn contained a plastic bag, which in turn contained Dempsey's

ashes. There were a lot of them; but then he'd been a big dog.

Todd sat down in the middle of the yard, where he and Dempsey had so often

sat and watched the sky together, and poured some of the ashes into the palm of his

hand. What part of this grey sand was his tail, he wondered, and which his snout?

Which part the place behind his ear he'd love you forever if you rubbed? Or didn't

it matter? Was that the point about scattering ashes: that in the end they looked

the same? Not just the snout and the tail, but a dog's ashes and a man's ashes. All

reducible, with the addition of a little flame, to this mottled dust? He put his

lips to it, once, to kiss him goodbye. In his head he could hear his mother telling

him that it was a gross, unhealthy thing to do, so he kissed them again, just to

spite her. Then he stood up and cast Dempsey's ashes around, like a farmer sewing

seeds. There was no wind. The ash fell where he threw it, evenly distributed over

the mutt's dominion.

"See you, dog," he said, and went back into the house to get himself a large

bourbon.

PART THREE

A DARKER TIME

ONE

For four months, in the summer of his seventeenth year, Todd had worked at

the Sunset Home for the Elderly on the outskirts of Orlando, where he'd got a job

through his Uncle Frank, who worked as an accountant for Sunset Homes Incorporated.

The place was little more than a repository for the nearly-dead; working there had

been the most depressing experience of his young life. Most of his duties did not

involve the patientsóhe had no training as a nurse, nor intended to get any. But the

care of one of the older occupants, a man by the name of Duncan McFarlane, was given

over to him because McFarlane was prone to unruliness when he was being bathed by

the female nurses. McFarlane was no great trouble to Todd. He was just a sour

sonofabitch who wasn't going to make anybody's life one jot easier if he could

possibly avoid it. The ritual of giving a bed-bath to his patient was Todd's

particular horror; the sight of his own body awoke a profound self-disgust in the

old man. Asking around, Todd had discovered that McFarlane had been an athlete in

his prime. But now at the age of eighty-three there was no trace of the strength or

the beauty his body had once possessed. He was a pallid sack of shit and resentment,

revolted by the sight of himself.

Look at me, he would say when Todd uncovered him, Christ, look at me,

Christ, look at me. Every time it was the same murmured horror. Look at me, Christ,

look at me.

To this day, the image of McFarlane's nakedness remained with Todd in all

its grotesque particulars. The little beard of dirty white hair that hung from the

old man's scrotum; the constellation of heavy, dark warts above his left nipple; the

wrinkled folds of pale, spotted flesh that hung under his arms. Todd felt guilty

about his disgust, and kept it to himself, until one day it had been the subject of

discussion in the day-room, and he'd discovered that his feelings were shared,

Page 44

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

especially by the male members of the nursing staff. The female nurses seemed to

have more compassion, perhaps; or were simply indifferent to the facts of creeping

senility. But the other men on the staff—there were four of them besides Todd—were

afterwards constantly remarking on the foulness of their charges. One of the

quartet—a black guy from New Orleans called Austin Harper—was particularly eloquent

on the subject.

"I ain't endin' up like any o' these ol' fucks," he remarked on more than one occasion, "I'd blow my fuckin' brains out 'fore I'd sink that fuckin' low."

"It won't happen," Todd had said.

"How'd you reckon that, white boy?" Austin had said. He'd patted Todd on his

backside; which he took every possible opportunity to do.

"When we're as old as these folks there'll be ways to fix it," Todd replied.

"You mean we'll live forever? Bullshit. I don't buy any of that

science-fiction crap, boy."

"I'm not saying we'll live forever. But they'll have figured out what gives

us wrinkles, and they'll have a way to smooth them out."

"Will they now? So you's goin' to be all smoothed out, is you?"

"I sure as hell am."

"You'll still die, but you'll die all smoothed out an' pretty?" He tapped

Todd's ass appreciatively again.

"Will you quit doin' that?" Todd said.

"I'll quit when you quit wavin' it in my nose." Austin laughed, and slapped

Todd's ass a third time, a stinging swat.

"Anyways," Todd said, "I don't give a shit what you think. I'm going to die

pretty."

The phrase had lingered. To die pretty; that was the grand ambition. To die

pretty, and not find yourself like poor old Duncan McFarlane, looking down at his

own nakedness and saying, over and over: Oh Christ, look at me. Oh Christ, look at

me. Oh Christ...

Two months after Todd had left Florida to go to Los Angeles for a

screen-test, he'd got a scrawled note from Austin Harper, who'd given that it was more

or less certain that they'd never see one another again, figured it was okay for

Todd to know that if Austin had had a chance he would have plowed Todd's ass 'all

the way to Key West and back'. 'And then you'd be all smoothed out, baby," Harper

had written.

"Oh, and by the way," he'd added, "That old fuck McFarlane died a week ago.

Tried to give himself a bath in the middle of the night. Drowned himself in three

inches of water. That's what I call a damn fool thing to do.î

"Stay smooth, m'man. You're going to do great. I know it. Just remember to

thank me when they gives you an Oscar."

TWO

"Kiddo?"

Todd was floating in a blind black place, his body untethered. He couldn't

even feel it.

"Kiddo? Can you hear me?"

Despite the darkness all around, it was a comfortable place to be in. There

were no predators here in this no-man's-land. There were no sharks circling, wanting

ten-percent of his flesh. Todd felt pleasantly removed from everything. Except for

that voice calling him.

"Kiddo? If you can hear me, move your finger."

It was a trick, he knew. It was a way to get him to go back to the world

where once he'd lived and breathed and been unhappy. But he didn't want to go. It

was too brittle that place; brittle and bright. He wanted to stay where he was, here

in the darkness, floating and floating.

"Kiddo...it's Donnie."

Donnie?

Wait, that couldn't be right. His older brother, Donnie? They hadn't talked

in months. Why would he be here, trying to seduce him out of his comfortable

hideaway? But then, if not Donnie, then who? Nobody else ever called him Kiddo.

Todd felt a dim murmur of anxiety. Donnie lived in Texas, for God's sake.

What was he doing here?

Page 45

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"Talk to me, Kiddo."

Very reluctantly, Todd forced himself to reply to the summons, though when

he finally coaxed his lips to shape it the sound he made was as remote

as the moon.

"Donnie?"

"Well, howdy. I must say it's good to have you back in the land of the livin'." He felt a hand laid on his arm. The sensation, like Donnie's voice, and his

own, felt distant and dulled.

"You had us a bit stirred up for a while there."

"Why's...it...so dark in here?" Todd said. "Will you have someone turn on

the lights?"

"Everything's going to be okay, buddy."

"Donnie. Please. Turn on the lights."

"They are on, Kiddo. It's just you've got some bandages over your face.

That's all it is. You're going to be just fine."

Bandages on his face.

Now it all started to come back to him. His last memories. He'd been going

under Burrows's knife for the big operation.

The last thing he remembered was Burrows telling him to count backwards from

ten. Burrows had been smiling reassuringly at him, and as Todd counted-had thought:

I wonder how much work he's had done on that face of his? The nose for sure. And all

the lines gone from around his eyesó

"Are you counting, Todd?" Burrows had said.

"Ten. Nine. Eightó"

There hadn't been a seven. Not that Todd could remember. The drugs had swept

him off to their own empty version of La-La land.

But now he was back from that dreamless place, and Donnie was here at his

bedside, all the way from Texas. Why? And why the bandages over his eyes? Burrows

hadn't said anything about bandages.

"My mouth's so dry," Todd whispered.

"No problemo, buddy," Donnie replied gently. "I'll get the nurse in here."

"I'll have a vodka...straight up."

Donnie chuckled. "I'll see what I can do."

Todd heard him get up and go to the door, and call for a nurse. His

consciousness wavered, and he felt himself slipping back into the void from which

he'd just been brought by Donnie's voice. The prospect of that lush darkness didn't

seem quite as comforting as it had a few moments before. He started to panic,

scrambling to keep hold of the world, at least until he knew what had happened to

him.

He called out to Donnie: "Where are you? Donnie? Are you there?"

Footsteps came hurriedly back in his direction.

"I'm still here, Kiddo." Donnie's voice was tender. Todd couldn't remember

ever hearing such tenderness in it before now.

"Burrows didn't tell me it'd be like this," Todd said.

"There's nothing to get worked up about," Donnie replied.

Even in his semi-drugged state, Todd knew a lie when he heard one.

"You're not a very good actor," he said.

"Runs in the family," Donnie quipped, and squeezed Todd's arm again.
"Just

kidding."

"Yeah...yeah..." Todd said. As he spoke a spasm of pain ran from the bridge

of his nose and spread across his face in both directions. He was suddenly in

excruciating agony. "Jesus," he gasped. "Jesus. Make it stop!"

He felt Donnie's reassuring hand go from his arm; heard his brother crossing

to the door again, yelling as he went, his voice suddenly shrill with fear: "Will

somebody get in here. Right now! Christ!"

Todd's panic, momentarily soothed by his brother's voice, started to rise up

in him again. He raised his hand to his face. The bandages were tight and smooth,

like a visor over his head, searing him in. He started to hyperventilate.

He was

going to die in here, if he didn't get this smothering stuff off his face.
He began

to claw at the bandages. He needed air. Right now!

Air, for Christ's sake, airó

"Mr. Pickett, don't do that! Please!"

The nurse caught hold of Todd's hands, but the panic and the pain
made him

strong and she couldn't prevent him from digging his fingers beneath
the bandages

Page 46

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

and pulling.

There were flashes of light in his head, but he knew it wasn't the light
of

the outside world he was seeing. His brain was overloading; fear was
leaping like

lightning across his skull. His blood roared in his ears. His body
thrashed around

in the bed as though he was in the grip of a seizure.

"All right, nurse. I've got him now."

Suddenly, there were hands around his wrists. Somebody stronger
than the

nurse was gently but insistently pulling his fingers away from his face.
Then a

voice came to find him through the sound of his own sobs.

"Todd? This is Doctor Burrows. Everything is fine. But please calm down. Let

me explain what's going on. There's nothing to worry about." He spoke like a

hypnotist, the cadence of his sentences even, his voice completely calm. And while

he went on speaking, repeating the same informationóthat everything was fine, all

Todd had to do was breathe deeply, deeplyóhe held Todd's arms against the bed.

After a few moments, the bright bursts of light began to become less frequent. The din of blood began to recede. So, by degrees, did the waves of panic.

"There," Doctor Burrows said, when the worst of it was over. "You see?

Everything's fine and dandy. Now why don't we get you a fresh pillow? Nurse Karyn?

Would you please get Mr. Pickett a nice fresh pillow?"

Oh so gently, Burrows raised the upper half of Todd's body off the bed,

talking to him all the while: the same calming monologue. All the strength to

resist, indeed all need to do so, had gone out of Todd. All he could do was abandon

himself to Burrows' care.

Finally he said: "What's...wrong...with me?"

"First let's get you comfortable," Burrows replied. "Then we'll talk it all through."

Todd felt the motion of the nurse as she slipped the fresh pillow into place

behind him. Then, with the same tenderness as he used to lift him up, Burrows

carefully lowered Todd back down upon the pillow.

"There. Isn't that better?" Burrows said, finally letting his patient go.

Todd felt a pang of separation, like a child who'd been abruptly deserted. "I'm

going to let you rest for a while," Burrows went on. "And when you've slept, we'll

talk properly."

"No..." Todd said.

"Your brother Don's here with you."

"I'm here, Todd."

"I want to talk now." Todd said, "Not later. Now. Donnie! Make him stay."

"It's okay, Kiddo," Donnie said with just the right edge of threat, "Doctor

B.'s not goin' anywhere. Answer his question, Doc."

"Well, first things first," Burrows said. "There's absolutely nothing wrong

with your eyes, if that's what you're worried about. We just have to keep the

dressings in place around your eye-sockets."

"You didn't tell me I'd be waking up in the dark," Todd said.

"No..." Burrows replied. "That's because the procedure didn't go quite

as we

planned. But every operation is a little different, as you'll remember I explained

to you. I'm sorry I wasn't here when you woke..."

Now that he was calmer, Todd began to recall some of the things about

Burrows that had irritated him. One of them was that voice of his: that fake basso

profundo that was a practiced attempt to conceal his queeniness, and to match his

voice to the heroic proportions of his body. An artificial body, of course. The man

was a walking advertisement for his craft. He was fifty-five at least, but he had

the skin of a baby, the arms and the chest of a body-builder and the wasp-waist of a

showgirl.

"Just tell me the truth," Todd said to him. "Did something go wrong? I'm a

big boy. I can take it."

There was a pin-drop silence. Todd waited. Finally, Burrows said: "We had a

few minor complications with your procedure, that's all. I've explained it all to

your brother Donald. There's nothing absolutely nothing for you to be concerned

about. It's just going to take a little more time than we'dó"

"What kind of complications?" "We don't need to go into that now, Todd."

"Yes, we do," Todd said. "It's my face, for fuck's sake. Tell me what's going on. And don't screw around with me. I don't like it."

"Tell him, Doc," Donnie said, quietly but firmly.

Todd heard Burrows sigh. Then that studied voice again: "You'll remember

Page 47

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

that during the preparation evaluation I did warn you that on occasion there were

reactions to chemical peels which could not be predicted. And I'm afraid that's what

happened in your case. You've had an extreme, and as I say completely unpredictable

allergic response to the peel. I don't believe for one moment there's going to be

any significant damage in the long term. You're a healthy young man. We're going to

see some swift epidermal regenerationó"

"What the fuck's that?"

"Your skin's gonna grow back," Donnie replied, his Texan drawl turning the

remark into a piece of cold comedy.

"What do you mean?" Todd said.

"The effect of the procedure we useóas I explained in our evaluation,

and is

fully described in the literature I gave youó"

"I didn't read it," Todd said. "I trusted you."

"óthe procedures we use may be likened to a very controlled chemical burn,

which produces changes in the dermis and the epidermis. Damaged or blemished skin is

removed, and after forty-eight hours at the most, new, healthy skin is naturally

generated, which has pleasing characteristics. The client regains a youthfuló"

This time it was Donnie who interrupted Burrows' molassic flow. "Tell him

the rest," Donnie said, his voice thick with anger. "If you don't tell him, I will,"

Donnie went on. He didn't give Burrows a chance to make the choice. "You've been out

of it since you had the operation, Kiddo. In a coma. For three days. That's why they

sent for me. They were getting worried. I tried to have you moved to a proper

hospital, but that bitch of a manageróMaxine, is it?óshe wouldn't let me. She said

you'd want to stay here. Said she was afraid the press would find out if you were

transferred."

"We're perfectly capable of looking after Mr. Pickett here," Burrows said.

"There isn't a hospital in California that could give him better care."

"Yeah, well, maybe," Donnie said. "Seems to me he'd still be better off in

Cedar Sinai."

"I really resent the implication" Burrows began.

"Will you just shut the fuck up?" Donnie said wearily. "I don't give a monkey's ass what you resent. All I care about is getting my brother properly fixed

up and out of here."

"And as I say"

"Yeah. As you say. Tell you what, why don't you and Nurse Karyn there step

out for a few minutes and let me have a private word with my brother?"

Burrows didn't attempt any further self-justification, and Todd knew why. He

could imagine Donnie's expression in perfect detail: both brothers got colour in

their faces when they were riled up; and a cold eye. Burrows duly retreated, which

was the wisest thing he could have done.

"I want to get you out of here, Kiddo," Donnie said as soon as they had gone. "I don't trust these people as far as I could throw 'em. They're full of

shit."

"I need to talk to Maxine before we do anything."

"What the fuck for? I don't trust her anymore than I trust these sons of bitches."

There was a long silence. Todd knew what was coming next; so he just waited

for it.

"Just so you know," Donnie said, "You've done some damn-fool things in your

life, but this whole deal is the stupidest idea I ever heard. Getting yourself a

fuckin' face-lift? What kinda thing is that? Christ. Does Momma know about this?"

"No. I put you down as next of kin. I thought you'd understand."

"Well I can't say I do. It's a mess. It's a goddam mess. And I've got to go back to Texas tomorrow."

"Why so soon?"

"Because I've got a court appearance at eight o'clock on Thursday morning.

Linda's tryin' to take away my weekends with Donnie Junior, and if I'm not in court

her lawyer's going to get the judge to rule against me. I've been up before him a

couple of times, and he doesn't like me. So, I'm going to have to love you and leave

you, which I don't much like doin'. I guess I could call Momma andó"

"No! No, Donnie, please. I don't want her here." Todd reached out blind;

caught hold of Donnie's arm. "I'll be okay. You don't have to worry about me. I'll

be just fine."

ìAll right. I hear you. I won't call Momma. Besides, the worst's over. I'm

Page 48

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

sure that's right. But listen to me, you get yourself the hell out of here and go to

a proper hospital."

"I don't want the press finding out about this. If Maxine thinksó"

"Have you heard a fuckin' word I said?" Donnie said, his voice getting

louder. "I don't trust that bitch. She's out for herself. That's all she cares

about. Her piece of the action."

"Don't start shouting."

"Well, what the fuck do you expect? I've been sitting here for seventy-two

hours straight wondering how I was going to tell Mom that you died having plastic

fucking surgery on your fucking faceó" He paused for a breath. "Christ, if Dad was

alive...he'd be so damned ashamed."

"Okay, Donnie. I get the message. I'm a fuck-up."

"You're surrounded by so many ass-kissers, you're not getting good advice.

It makes me wanna puke. I mean, these people. They're all puttin on some

showótellin' me this, tellin' me thatóand meanwhile you're lying there at death's

door.î

ìAnd will they give you a straight answer? Will they fuck!" He paused to

draw sufficient breath to launch in afresh. "What happened to you, Kiddo? Ten years

ago you would have laughed your butt off at the thought of getting a face-lift."

Todd let go of Donnie's arm. He drew a deep, sorrowful breath. "It's hard to

explain," he said. "But I got to stay on top of the heap somehow. Younger guys keep

coming along..."

"So let 'em. Why do you need to stay on top? Why not walk away from it?

You've had a good run, for Christ's sake. You've had it all, I'd say. All and more.

I mean fuck! What more do you want? Why do this to yourself?"

"Because I like the life, Donnie. I like the fame. I like the money."

Donnie snorted. "How much more money do you damn well need? You've got more

than you can spend if youó"

"Don't tell me what I've got and I haven't got. You don't know what it costs

to live. Houses and taxes." He stopped his defense; took a different track. "Anyhow,

I don't hear you complaining"

"Wait" Donnie said, knowing what was coming. But Todd wasn't about to be

stopped.

"When I send you money."

"Don't start that."

"Why not? You sit there tellin' me what a fuck-up I am, but you never said

no to the cash when you needed it. Which is all the time. Who paid your last legal

bills, Donnie? And the mortgage on the house so you could start over with Linda, for

the third time or fourth time or whatever it was? Who paid for that mistake?"

He let the question hang there, unanswered. Eventually, very quietly, Donnie

said: "This is so fucked. I came here"

"to see whether I was dead or alive."

"to look after you."

"You never cared before," Todd said, with painful bluntness. "Well did you?

All these years, when have you ever come out here and spent time with me?"

"I was never welcome."

"You were always welcome. You just never came because you were too fucking

jealous. Why don't you admit it? At least once, between us, say it: you were so

fucking jealous you couldn't stand the idea of coming out here."

"You know what? I don't need to hear this," Donnie said.

"You should have heard it years ago."

"I'm outta here."

"Go on. You did your gloating. Now you can go home and tell everyone what an

asshole your brother is."

"I'm not going to do that." Donnie said. "You're still my brother, whatever

you do. But I can't help you if you surround yourselfó"

"ówith ass-kissers. Yeah. You said that."

Todd heard Donnie get up and cross to the door, dragging his feet as he

always had.

"What are you doing?" Todd said.

"I'm leaving. Like I said I would. You're going to be fine. That faggot Burrows will take very good care of you."

"Don't I get a hug or something?"

“Another time. When I like you better,” Donnie said.

“And when the hell will that be?” Todd yelled after him.

But all he got by way of reply was the echo of his own voice off the opposite wall.

THREE

Maxine turned up a little after seven, and after a few perfunctory expressions of relief that Todd was “back from the dead”, as she indelicately put

it, quickly moved on to the news she was here to debate.

“Somebody in this place has a big mouth,” she said. “I got a call from the

editor of the Enquirer this afternoon, asking if it was true that you’d been

admitted to a private hospital. I told him absolutely not; this was a lie, garbage

etc. etc. And I said that if he published that you were in hospital or anything

vaguely resembling that, we’d sue him and his wretched rag. Ten seconds later I’ve

got Peter Bart calling from Variety, asking the same damn question. And while I’m on

with Peter, trying not to tell him an out-and-out lie ‘cause he has a nose for

bullshit, I have a call from People on the other line, asking the same question.

Coincidence? I don’t think so.”

Todd moaned behind his mask of bandages.

"I've told Burrows we have to move you," Maxine went on.

"Wait, Donnie said yesterday you told him that you wanted me to stay here."

"That was before I got the calls. Now it's just a matter of time before some

photographer finds his way in here."

"Shit. Shit. Shit."

"That would make a nice little picture, wouldn't it?" Maxine said, just in

case Todd hadn't already got a snap-shot in his mind's eye. "You lying in bed with

your face all bandaged up."

"Wait!" Todd said, "They'd never be able to prove it was me."

"The point is: it is you, Todd. Whoever's put out the word about your being

here is working in this building. They've probably got access to your records, your

chartsó"

Todd felt a spasm of the same panic that had seized him when he'd first

woken up. The horror of being trapped. This time he governed it, determined not to

let Maxine see him losing control.

"So when are you getting me out of here?" he said.

"I've got a car coming at five tomorrow morning. I've told Burrows I

want

the security in this place tripled 'til you leave. We'll take you to the beach house

in Malibu until we find somewhere more practical."

"I can't go home?" Todd said, knowing even as he floated the idea that it

was out of the question. That would be the first place the journalists and the

paparazzi would come looking for him.

"Maybe we should fly you out of state when you're feeling a little better.

I'll call John; see if I can get him to fly you up to Montana."

"I don't want to go to Montana."

"You'd be a lot more secure up there than here. We could arrange for round-the-clock nursingó"

"I said no. I don't want to be that far away from everything."

ìAll right, we'll find some place here in the city. What about your new lady-friend? Miss Bosch? She's going to be asking questions too. What do you want me

to tell her?"

"She's gone. She's shooting something in the Cayman Islands."

"She was fired," Maxine said. "'Creative differences' apparently. The director wanted her to show her tits and she said no. Though God knows some of her

runway work has left little to the imagination. I don't know why she's

got coy all

of a sudden. Anyway, she wants to talk to you. What do I say?"

"Anything you like."

"So you don't want her in on this?"

"Fuck no. I don't want anybody to know."

"Okay. It's going to be difficult, but okay. I've got to go. Do you want me

to send a nurse in to give you something to help you sleep?"

"Yeah..."

"We'll find a place for you, until you mend. I'll ask Jerry Brahms. He knows

the city back to front. All we need's a little hideaway. It needn't be fancy."

Page 50

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"Just make sure he doesn't get wind of what's going on," Todd said.

"Jerry

talks."

"Give me a little credit," Maxine replied. "I'll see you tomorrow morning.

You get some sleep. And don't worry, nobody's going to find out where you are or

what's happened. I'll kill 'em first."

"Promise."

"With my bare hands."

So saying, she was out of the room, leaving Todd alone and in the dark.

Donnie was right, of course. This was undoubtedly the stupidest thing he had

ever done. But there was no going back on it. Life, like a movie, only made sense

running in one direction. What could he do but go with the flow, and hope to hell

there was a happy ending waiting for him in the last reel?

A storm moved in off the Pacific in the middle of the night; the seventh

storm of that winter, and the worst. Over the next forty-eight hours it would dump

several inches of rain along the coast from Monterey to San Diego, creating a

catalogue of minor disasters. Storm-drains overflowed and turned the streets of

Santa Barbara into white-water rivers; two citizens and seven street-people were

swept away and drowned. Power-lines were brought down by the furious winds, the most

badly struck area being Orange County, where a number of communities remained

without power for the next three days. Along the Pacific Coast Highway, where the

wildfires of the previous autumn had stripped the hillsides of vegetation, the naked

earth, no longer knitted together by roots, turned into mud and slid down onto the

road. There were countless accidents; fourteen people perished, including a family

of seven Mexicans, who'd only been in the promised land four hours, having skipped

over the border illegally. All burned up together, trapped in their overturned

truck. In the Pacific Palisades, the deluge carried away several million dollar

homes; in Topanga Canyon, the same.

Of course all this made the business of getting Todd from the hospital to

Maxine's beach-house both more lengthy and frustrating than it would have been

otherwise, but it may have helped to keep the endeavor secret. Certainly there were

no photographers at the hospital door when they left; nor anybody waiting for them

in the vicinity of the beach-house. But that didn't mean they were out of danger.

Calls to Maxine's offices inquiring about Todd's condition had multiplied

exponentially, and they were now coming in from further afield—several from Japan,

where Gallows had just opened—as the rumors spread. One of the German reporters had

even had the temerity to suggest that Todd was undergoing plastic surgery.

"I gave him hell. Fucking Kraut."

"Aren't you German on your mother's side?"

"He's still a fucking Kraut."

Todd was sitting in the back of Maxine's Mercedes, with Nurse Karyn who had

been thoroughly investigated by Maxine and judged reliable on his side. The nurse

was a woman of few words: but those she chose to utter usually carried some punch.

"I don't see why y'all give a damn. I mean, what does it matter if somebody

gets wind of it? He just got a chemical peel and a few nips and tucks. What's the

big deal?"

"It's not something Todd's fans need to know about," Maxine replied.

"They've got a certain idea of who Todd is."

"So they'd think it wasn't too masculine?" Nurse Karyn said. "Shall we just

move on from this?" Maxine said, catching Nurse Karyn's gaze in the driving mirror,

and shaking her head to indicate that the conversation or at least this portion of

it was at an end. Todd, of course, saw none of this. He was still bandaged blind.

"How are you doing, Todd?" Maxine said.

"Wondering how soon"

"Soon," Maxine said. "Soon. Oh, by the way, I had a word with Jerry Brahms,

and told him exactly what we needed. Two hours later he came back to me, said he had

the perfect house for you. I'm going to see it with him tomorrow"

"Did he tell you where it was?"

"Somewhere up in the hills. Apparently, it was a place he used to go and

play when he was a kid. I guess this is in the forties. He says it's completely

secluded. Nobody's going to come bothering you."

"He's full of shit. They have fucking bus tours up in the hills. Every other

house has somebody famous living in it."

"That's what I told him. But he swore this house was ideal. Nobody even

Page 51

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

knows about the canyon it's in. That's what he said. So we'll see. If it isn't any

good for you, I'll keep looking."

Later that afternoon, Burrows came out to the beach-house to change Todd's

dressings. It was a surreal ritual for all concerned: Todd semi-recumbent on the

deco sofa in the large window overlooking the beach, Maxine sitting at a distance,

nursing an early vodka stinger, Burrowsóhis confidence tentatively back in place

after the prickly exchanges of the previous dayóchatting about the rain and the

mud-slides while he delicately removed the bandages.

"Now the area around your eyes is going to be a little gummed up," he warned

Todd, "so don't try and open your eyes until I've done some cleaning."

Todd said nothing. He was just listening to the boom of his heart in his

head, and outside, the boom of the storm-stirred waves. They were out of step with

one another.

"I wonder," Burrows said to Maxine, "if you'd mind closing the blinds a little way? I don't want it to be too bright in here when I uncover Todd's eyes."

Todd heard Maxine crossing to the window; then the mechanical hum of the

electric blinds as they were lowered.

"I think that'll be far enough," Burrows said. A click, and the hum stopped.

"Now, let's see how things look Hold very still, Todd, please.â

Todd held his breath as the dressing which the bandages had kept in place

was gently teased away from his face. It felt as though a layer of his skin was

coming away along with the gauze. He heard a little intake of breath from Maxine.

"What?" he murmured.

"It's okay," Burrows said softly. "Please hold still. This is a very delicate procedure. By the way, when I put the new dressing on, I'll be leaving holes for your eyes, so you'll be able to...very still, please...good, good...so you'll be able to see."

"Maxine...?"

"Please, Todd. Don't move a muscle."

"I want her to tell me what it looks like."

"She can't see yet, Todd."

Burrows said something to his nurse, half under his breath. Todd didn't catch the words. But he heard the gauze, which had now been stripped from his face completely, dropped with a wet plop into a receptacle. He imagined it soaked with his blood, shreds of his skin stuck to it. His stomach turned.

"I want to puke," he said.

"Shall I stop for a moment?" Burrows asked.

"No. Just get it over and done with."

"Right. Well then I'm going to start cleaning you up," Burrows said. "Then we'll see how you're healing. I must say, it's looking very good so far."

"I want Maxine to take a look."

"In a minute," Burrows said. "Just let meó"

"Now," Todd said, nausea fueling his impatience. He raised his hand blindly

and pushed at Burrows. The man moved aside. "Maxine?" Todd said.

"I'm here."

Todd beckoned in the direction of Maxine's voice. "Come and look at me, will

you? I want you to tell me what I look like."

He heard Maxine's heels on the polished wood floor.

"Hurry." Her step quickened. Now she was close by him. "Well?" he said.

"To be honest, it's hard to tell till heó"

"Christ! I knew it! I fucking knew it! He fucked me up!"

"Wait, wait," Maxine said. "Calm down. A lot of it's just the ointments he

put on you. Let him clean it off before we get hysterical." Todd reached out to her.

She caught hold of his hand. "It's going to be okay," she said, though her grip was

clammy. "Just be patient. Why can't men be patient?"

"You're not patient," he reminded her.

"Just let him work, Todd."

"But you're not. Admit it."

"All right. I'm not patient."

Burrows set to work again, meticulously swabbing around Todd's eyes, cleaning his gummed lashes. The stink of cleaning fluid was sharp in

his nostrils,

his sinuses ran, and his eyes, when he finally opened them, were awash.

"Welcome back," Maxine said, unknitting her fingers from his, as though a

Page 52

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

little embarrassed by the intimacy. It took a couple of minutes for Todd's sight to

clear, and another two for his eyes to become accustomed to the dimmed light in the

room. But part by part, face by face, the world came back to him. The large,

half-blinded window, and the rain-lashed deck beyond it. The expensive ease of the

room; the Indian rug, the leather furniture, the Calder mobile, in yellow, red and

black, which hung below the sky-light. Burrows' knitted brow, and fixed, nervous

smile. The nurse, a pretty blonde woman. And finally Maxine, her face ashen. Burrows

moved away, like a portrait painter stepping back from a canvas to check the effect

he'd achieved.

"I want to see," Todd said to him.

"Give yourself a minute," Maxine said. "Are you still feeling sick?"

"Why? Is it going to make me heave?"

"No," she said. He almost believed her. "You just look a little puffy, that's all. And a little raw. It's not so bad."

"You used to be such a good liar."

"Really," she insisted. "It's not so bad."

"So let me look." Everyone in the room remained still. "Will somebody get me

a mirror? Okay?" He started to push himself up out of the chair. "I'll get one

myself."

"Stay where you are," Maxine said. "If you really want to see. Nurse? What's

your name?"

"Karyn."

"Go up into the bedroom, and you'll find a little hand mirror there on the

vanity. Bring it down."

It seemed to Todd the girl took an eternity to fetch the mirror. While they

waited, Burrows stared out at the rain. Maxine went to refresh her stinger.

Finally, the girl returned. Her eyes were on Burrows, not on Todd.

"Tell her to give it to me," Todd said.

"Go on," Burrows said.

The nurse put the mirror into Todd's hand. He took a deep breath, and looked

at himself.

There was a moment, as his eyes fixed on his reflection, when reality
fluttered, and he thought: none of this is real. Not the room, nor the
people in it,

nor the rain outside, nor the face in the mirror. Especially not the face
in the

mirror. It was a figment, fluttering and fluttering andó

"Jesus..." he said, like Duncan McFarlane, "look at meó"

The strength in his hand failed him, and the mirror dropped to the
ground.

It fell face down. The nurse stooped to pick it up, but he said: "No.
Leave it."

She stepped away from him, and he caught a look of fear in her eyes.
What

was she afraid of? His voice, was it? Or his face? God help him if it
was his face.

"Somebody open the blinds," he said. "Let's get some light in here. It's
not

a fucking funeral."

Maxine went to the switch, and flipped it. The mechanism hummed;
the blind

rose, showing him an expanse of rain-soaked deck, some furniture;
and beyond the

deck the beach. One solitary joggeróprobably some famous fool like
himself,

determined to preserve his beauty even in the pouring rain-was
trudging along the

shore, followed by two bodyguards. Todd got up from his chair and went to the

window. Then, despite the presence of strangers, he lay his hand against the cold

glass and began to weep.

FOUR

Burrows had brought both painkillers and tranquilizers that Todd

supplemented with a large order from Jerome Bunny, a ratty little Englishman who'd

been his supplier of illicit pharmaceuticals for the last four years. Under their

influence, Todd spent the next twenty-four hours in a semi-somnambulant state.

The rain was unrelenting. He sat in front of Maxine's immense television

screen and watched a succession of images of other people's painóhouses gone,

families dividedódreamily wondering if any of them would exchange their misery for

his. Every now and then a memory of the visage he'd seen in the mirroróvaguely

resembling somebody he'd known, but horribly wounded, filled with pus and

bloodówould swim up before him, and he'd take another pill, or two or three, and

wash it down with a shot of single malt, and wait for the opiates to drive the

horror off a little distance.

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

The new dressings Burrows had put on, though as promised they indeed left

his eyes uncovered, were still oppressive, and more than once Todd's hands went up

to his face unbidden, and would have ripped the bandages off had he not governed

himself in time. He felt grotesque, like something from a late-night horror movie,

his faceówhich had been his gloryó become some horrible secret, festering away

beneath the bandages. He asked Maxine what movie it wasósome Rock Hudson weepieóin

which a man was covered up this way. She didn't know.

"And stop thinking about yourself for a while," she said. "Think about something else."

Easily said; the trouble was thinking about himself came naturally to him.

In fact, it had become second-nature to him over the years to put all other

considerations out of sight: to care only about Todd Pickett, and (on occasion)

Dempsey Not to have done so would have meant a diminution of his power in the world.

After all, he'd been playing a game which only the truly self-obsessed had a chance

of victory. All others were bound to fall by the wayside. Now, when it would have

been healthier to direct his attention elsewhere, he'd simply lost the knack. And he

had no dog by his side to love him for being the boss, whatever the hell he looked

like.

Late in the day Maxine came back from her visit to the Hideaway, as she had

now dubbed it, with some good news. The house in the hills was just as Jerry Brahms

had advertised.

"It's the only house in the canyon," she said. "Which canyon?"

"I don't even think it's got a name."

"They've all got names, for God's sake."

"All I can tell you is that it's somewhere between Coldwater and Laurel. To

be perfectly honest I got a little lost following Jerry up there. He drives like the

Devil. And you know my sense of geography."

"Who does the house belong to?"

"Right now it's practically empty. There's some old stuff in thereólooks

like it goes back to the fifties, maybe earlieróbut nothing you'd want to use. I'll

have Marco choose some furniture from the Bel Air house and move it over. Get you

comfortable. But really it's ideal for what we need right now. By the way, Ms. Bosch

has been calling my office. She got quite pushy with Sawyer. She's absolutely

certain you're in Hawaii screwing some starlet."

"If that's what she wants to think."

"You don't care?"

"Not right now."

"You're certain you don't want to see her?"

"Christ. See her? No, Maxine. I do not want to see her."

"She was pretty upset."

"That's because she wanted a part in Warrior, and she thought I'd get

it for

her."

"Okay. End of discussion. If she calls againó?"

"Tell her she's right. I'm in Hawaii fucking the ass off anyone you care to

name. Manipulative little bitch."

"So here," Maxine said. She proffered an envelope.

"What's this?"

"They're the pictures I took of the Hideaway."

He took the envelope. "It'll be fine," he said before he'd even looked at the photographs.

"You might be there for a few weeks. I want you to be comfortable."

Todd pulled out the photographs.

"They're not the best, I'm afraid," Maxine said. "It's one of those throwaway cameras. And it was raining. But you get the idea."

"It looks big."

"According to Jerry they used to call them dream palaces. All the rich stars

had them. It's hokey, but it's got a lot of atmosphere. There's a huge master-bedroom with a view straight down the canyon. You can see Century City;

probably the ocean on a clear day. And the living room's as big as a ballroom.

Whoever built it put a lot of love into it. All the moldings, the door-

handles,

everything is top of the line. Of course it gets campy. There's a fresco on the

ceiling of the turret. All these faces leaning over looking down at you. Famous

movie stars, Jerry said. I didn't recognize any of 'em but I guess they were from

silent movies." She paused, waiting for judgment. Todd just keep looking at the

Page 54

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

pictures. "Well?" Maxine finally said. "Too Old Hollywood for you?"

"No. It's fine. Anyway, isn't that what I am now?"

"What?"

"Old Hollywood."

FIVE

Jerry Brahms had been a child-actor in the late thirties, but his career

hadn't lasted into puberty. He'd been at his 'most picturesque', as he like to put

it, at the age of nine or ten, after which it had all been downhill. Todd had always

thought of Brahms as being slightly ridiculous: with his overly-coifed silver hair,

his mock-English diction, and his unforgiving bitchiness about the profession to

which he'd once aspired.

But Jerry knew his Hollywood, there was no doubt of that. He lived and

breathed the place: its scandals, its triumphs. He was most informed about the

Golden Age of Tinseltown, which coincided, naturally enough, with the years of his

employment. In matters relating to this period his knowledge was encyclopedic, as

he'd proved three years before, when Todd had been looking for a new house. Jerry

had volunteered his services as a location scout, and after a week or two had taken

Todd and Maxine on a grand tour of properties he thought might be suitable. Todd had

not wanted to go; he found Jerry's chatter grating. But Maxine had insisted. "He'll

be heartbroken if you don't go," she'd said, "You know how he idolizes you. Besides,

he might have found something you like."

So Todd had gone along; and it had turned out to be quite a trip. Jerry had

organized the tour as though he was entertaining royalty (which perhaps, as far as

he was concerned, he was). He'd hired a stretch, supplied a champagne-and-caviar

hamper from Greenblatt's in case they wanted to picnic along the way, and a map of

the city, on which he'd meticulously marked their route. They went down to the

Colony in Malibu, they wound their way through Bel Air and Beverly Hills; they

looked at Hancock Park and Brentwood, their route plotted by Jerry so that he could

show off his knowledge of where the luminaries of Hollywood had lived and died. They

passed by Falcon Lair on Bella Drive, which Valentino had built at the height of his

fame. They went to the Benedict Canyon Drive home where Harold Lloyd had spent much

of his life, and past Jayne Mansfield's Pink Palace, which was as gaudy as ever, and

the house where Marilyn and DiMaggio had briefly lived in wedded bliss. They visited

homes occupied, at one time or another, by John Barrymore ("It still smells of

liquor," Jerry had remarked), Ronald Coleman, Hearst's widow, Marion Davies, Clara

Bow, Lucille Ball and Mae West. Not all the houses were for sale, nor open for

inspection; in some cases Jerry's research had simply turned up a property close by,

or one that resembled the house in which some luminary had lived. Other properties

were located in areas that had become shadows of their glamorous selves, but Jerry

didn't seem to care, or perhaps even notice. The fact that stars whose faces had

become legendary whose names evoked lives of elegance and

luxuryóhad lived in these

homes blinded him to the fact that there was often decay around them. They were like

sacred sites, and he a pilgrim. Todd had found the tenderness with which he talked

about these places, and about the people who'd once occupied them, curiously

touching.

Four or five times during the trip Jerry had directed the driver to a certain spot, invited Maxine and Todd to get out of the limo in order to show them a

certain view, then presented them with a photograph taken on precisely the same spot

sixty or seventy years before, when many of the places they visited had been little

more than an expanse of cactus and sand. It had been an education for Todd. He

hadn't realized until then how recent Los Angeles was, nor how tenuous its existence

was. The greenery was as artificial as the stucco walls and the colonial facades.

The city was one enormous back-lot, fake and fragile. If the water ever ceased to

pump then this verdant world, with its palaces and its swooning falls of

bougainvillea, would pass away.

As it turned out, Todd hadn't ended up buying any of the properties Jerry

had shown them that day, which was probably for the best. He finally decided to stay

in his house in Bel Air, but substantially remodel it. It didn't matter, Jerry had

said, apparently reserving his opinion on whether Todd would join the pantheon of

guests, nobody legendary had ever lived there.

Once Todd had said yes to the house in the hills, it took a day to get the

Page 55

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

move to the Hideaway properly organized; a day which left Todd spent sitting at the

window of the Malibu House, staring at the pale reflection of his bandaged face in

the rain-spattered glass. Technically, the pain-killers Burrows had given him should

have left him without any discomfort whatsoever, but for some reason, even when

supplemented by some of Bunny's specialsónot a minute of that day passed without his

being acutely aware of the pressure of the gauze and the bandages on his face. He

morbidly wondered if perhaps he wouldn't be left with this residue of feeling for

the rest of his life; he'd heard of people who'd had certain operations who were

made much worse by the surgeon's knife, and indeed were never the

same again. The

thought terrified him: that he'd done something completely irreversible. But there

was no use in regretting it. All he could do now was hope to God that this

unavoidable complication, as Burrow's insisted it was, would be quickly cured, and

he'd have his face back intact. He wasn't even hoping for improvement at this point.

Just the old, familiar Todd Pickett face would do fine; creases, laugh-lines and

all.

In the early evening Marco came to pick Todd up, having spent the morning

moving some essentials over to the new house. Todd went with him in the sedan,

Maxine and Jerry followed on.

"I got lost twice this morning," Marco said, "going back and forth from the

old house to the new one. I don't know why the hell it happened, but twice I got all

turned round and found myself back onto Sunset again."

"Weird," Todd said.

"There are no street signs up there."

"No?"

"There aren't many houses, either, which is what I like. No neighbours. No

tour buses. No fans climbing over the walls."

"Dempsey used to get them!"

"Oh yes, old Dempsey was great. Remember that German? Huge guy?
Climbs over

the wall, gets Dempsey's teeth clamped in his ass and then

"Tries to sue you."

"ótries to sue me."

They chuckled at the incident for a moment, then rode in silence for a
while.

SIX

"So what exactly did Jerry tell you about this place?"

Todd asked Maxine as they stood outside the Hideaway.

"Not much. I told you he'd played here as a kid? Yes, I did. Well, he
said

he had wonderful memories of the house. That was about all."

Maxine hadn't taken any pictures of the exterior, it had been raining
so

hard that day. Now, seen clearly for the first time, the house appeared
much larger

than Todd had anticipated; perfectly deserving of the term 'dream
palace'. He

couldn't get a complete grasp of its size because the vegetation around
it had been

left to run wild. A large grove of bamboo to the right of the front door
had grown

fully thirty feet, its tallest stalks standing higher than the chimney-stacks.

Bougainvillea grew everywhere in lunatic abundance, purple, red, pink and white; and

even the humble ferns, planted in the shade of the perimeter wall, had flourished

there, and grown antediluvian. There was room beneath the fronds to stand with your

hands raised and still not touch the nubby spores on their underbellies.

The house itself was palatial Spanish in style, with more than a hint of

Hollywood fantasy in its genes. The stucco was a washed-out pink, the roof a

washed-out red. There was a great deal of elaborate tilework at the front steps, and

around the windows, the tiles themselves still bright blue and turquoise and white,

the complex interplay of their patterns lending a touch of Moorish beauty to the

facade. The front door looked as though it had been purloined from the set of a

medieval epic; the kind of door Douglas Fairbanks Senior might have slammed and

bolted shut to keep out an army of evil-doers. It would have sufficed too, in its

enormity. Maxine had to push hard to open it; and when it finally swung wide it did

so not with a gothic creak but with a deep rumble, as a system of counterweights

hidden in the wall aided her labor.

"Very dramatic," Todd remarked, playing it off. In truth, he was impressed

by the scale of the place; by its scale and theatricality. But guileless enthusiasm

Page 56

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

he'd had shamed out of him long ago. It wasn't cool to like anything too much,

except yourself.

Maxine led the way through the turret, with its grandiose spiral staircase

and its trompe l'oeil ceiling, into the house. The photographs she'd taken had come

nowhere near doing the place justice. Even stripped of most of its furniture, as it

was, and in need of repair, it was still nothing short of magnificent. There was

everywhere evidence of master craftsmen at work: from the pegged wood floors to the

elegantly carved ceiling panels; from the exquisite symmetry of the marble mantels

to the filigree of the wrought iron handrails, only the best had been good enough

for the man or woman who'd owned this place.

Marco had artlessly arranged a few items of Todd's furniture in the living

room, a little island of brittle modernity in the midst of something older and more

mysterious. Todd made a mental note to give everything he owned away, and start

again. In future, he was going to buy antiques.

They went through to the kitchen. It was built on the same heroic scale as

everything else: ten cooks could have happily worked in it and not got in one

another's way.

"I know it's all ridiculously old-fashioned," Maxine said. "But it'll do for a little while, won't it?"

"It'll do just fine," Todd said, still surprised at how much the place pleased him. "What's out back?"

"Oh the usual. A pool. Tennis courts. And a huge koi pond. Probably a polo

field for all I know."

"Any fish in the pond?"

"No. You want fish? "It's no big deal."

"I can get koi for you if you want them. Just say the word."

"I know. But it's not worth it. I'll be here a month and gone."

"So take them with you."

"And where would I put them?"

"Okay," Maxine shrugged. "No fish." She went to the kitchen window and

continued her description of the real estate. "The whole canyon belongs to the

house, as far as I can see, but the gardens spread down the hill an acre and a half

and all the way up to the top of the hill behind us. There's a guest-house up there.

Perhaps two. I didn't go look: I figured you wouldn't be having any visitors."

"Does Jerry know anything about the history of the place?"

"I'm sure he does, but to be honest I didn't ask."

"What did you tell him about me?"

"I told him you had a stalker, and she was getting dangerous. You needed to

get out of the Bel Air house for a while until the police had caught her. Frankly,

I'm not sure he bought it. He's got to have heard the rumors. I think we'd be best

letting him in on what's been happeningó"

"We've had this conversation onceó"

"Hear me out, will you? If we make him feel like he's part of the

conspiracy, he'll stay quiet, just because he wants to please you. He'll only get

chatty if he thinks we kept him out because we didn't trust him."

"Why the hell would he want to please me?"

"You know why, Todd. He's in love with you."

Todd shook his bandaged head, which was a mistake. The room

around him swam

for a moment, and he had to grab hold of the table. "You okay?" Maxine said.

He raised his hands, palms out, in mock surrender. "I'm fine. I just need a

pill and a drink."

"I sent Marco out to get some supplies."

"But Todd...it's not even noon."

"So? If I stay here and get shit-faced every day for the next month who's

going to care? Find me something to drink, will you?"

"What about Jerry? We didn't finishó"

"We'll talk about Jerry some other time."

ìAm I telling him or not?"

"I said I don't want to talk about it any more."

ìAll right. But if he starts to gossip, don't say I didn't warn you."

"If he tells the fucking National Enquirer it's my fault. Happy?" Todd

didn't wait for a reply. Leaving Maxine to search for the liquor, he wandered out to

the back of the house. The lawnówhich lay at the bottom of a long flight of steps

from the house, their railings entirely overtaken by vinesówas the size of a small

field, but it had been invaded on every side by the offspring of the plants, shrubs

and trees which surrounded it, many of them in premature flower.
Bird of Paradise

trees twenty feet tall, sycamore and eucalyptus, rose bushes and fox-gloves, early

California poppies shining like satin in the grass; meadowfoam and corn lily, hairy

honeysuckle and wild grape, golden yarrow, blue blossom and red huckleberry. And

everywhere, of course, the ubiquitous pampas grass; soft, fleecy plumes swaying in

the sun. It was uncommon, even uncanny, verdancy.

Todd strode across the lawn, which was still wet from the rain, down to the

pool. Dragonflies flitted everywhere; bees wove their nectar trails through the

balmy air. The pool was a baroque affair, descending from the relatively restrained

style of the main house into pure Hollywood kitsch. The model, perhaps, was B de

Mille Roman. A large mock-classical bronze fountain was set at the back of the pool,

the intertwined limbs of its figuresóa sea-god and his female attendantsórendered

more baroque still by the tracery of living vines which had crept up over it. A

sizable conch in the sea-god's hands had once been a source of rejuvenating waters

for the pool, but those waters had ceased to flow a long time ago.
Todd was mildly

disappointed. He would have liked to have seen sparkling blue water
in the pool

instead of the few inches of bottle green rain-water that were there at
the bottom.

He turned and looked back towards the house. It was still more
impressive

from this side than it had been from the front, its four floors rising like
the

tiers of a wedding cake, its walls lush with ivy in places, and in others
naked.

Beyond it, further up the hill, Todd could just see a glimpse of one of
the

guest-house that Maxine had mentioned. Altogether, it really was an
impressive

parcel of land, with or without the buildings. Had Jerry shown it to
him as part of

the grand tour Todd might well have been tempted to invest. The fact
that Jerry

hadn't done so probably meant that it had not belonged to anyone of
significance,

though that seemed odd. This wasn't just any Hollywood show-place:
it was the cr me

de la cr me, a glorious confection of a residence designed to show off
all the

wealth, power and taste of a great star.

By the time he'd made his way back inside, Marco had turned up from

Greenblatt's with a carload of supplies. He welcomed his boss with his usual crooked

smile and a generous glass of bourbon. "So what do you think of the Old Dark House?"

"You know...in a weird way I like it here."

"Really?" said Maxine. "It's nothing like your taste." She was plainly still

mildly irritated by their earlier exchange, though for Todd it was past history,

soothed away by his wanderings in the wilderness.

"I never really felt comfortable in Bel Air," he said. "That house has always been more like a hotel to me than a home."

"I wouldn't say this place was exactly cozy" Maxine remarked.

"Oh, I don't know," Todd said. He sipped on his bourbon, smiling into his

glass. "Dempsey would have liked it," he said.

SEVEN

On Thursday, 18th of March, Maxine got a call that she knew was coming. The

caller was a woman called Tammy Lauper, who ran the International Todd Pickett

Appreciation Society, which despite its high falutin' title had its headquarters,

Maxine knew, in the Laupers' house in Sacramento. Tammy was calling to ask a very

simple question, one that she said she was 'passing on' to Maxine from millions of

Todd's fans worldwide: Where was Todd?

Maxine had dealt with Tammy on many occasions in the past, though if she

possibly could she ducked the calls and let Sawyer deal with them. The trouble was

that Tammy Lauper was an obsessive, and though in the eight years she'd been running

the 'Appreciation Society' (she'd once said to Maxine she hated to hear it called a

fan club. 'I'm not an hysterical teenager,' she'd said. This was true: Tammy Lauper

was married, childless, and, when last spotted, an overweight woman in her middle

thirties) although in that time she'd done a great deal to support Todd's movies, and

could on occasion be a useful disseminator of deliberately erroneous information,

she was not somebody Maxine had much time for. The woman annoyed her, with her

perpetual questions about trivia, and her unspoken assumption that somehow Todd

belonged to her. When she was obliged to speak to the Lauper woman because there was

some delicate matter in the air, and she needed to carefully modulate the flow of

news she always aimed to keep the exchanges brief. As courteous as possible Tammy

could be prickly if she didn't feel as though she was being given her due but brief.

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

Today, however, Tammy wasn't about to be quickly satisfied; she was like a

terrier with a rat. Every time Maxine thought she'd satisfied the woman's curiosity,

back she'd come with another enquiry.

"Something's wrong," she kept saying. "Todd's not been seen by anyone.

Usually when he goes away, members of the Society spot him, and they report to me.

But I haven't heard one word. Something's wrong. Because I always hear."

"I'm sure you do."

"So what's going on? You've got to tell me."

"Why should anything be going on?" Maxine said, doing her best to maintain

her equilibrium. "Todd's tired and he needs a break, so he went away for a few

weeks."

"Out of state?"

"Yes. Out of state."

"Out of the country?"

"I'm afraid he asked me not to say."

"Because we've got members all over the world."

"I realize that, butó"

"When he went on his honeymoon to Morocco," Tammy went on, "I had six

reports of sightings." (This was a reference to the event which had caused Maxine

more publicity problems than any other in Todd's life: his short-lived marriage to

the exquisitely emaciated model Avril Fox, which had been strewn with potentially

image-besmirching scenes: adulteries, a couple of mÈnage-ý-trois involving Avril's

sister, Lucy, and a spot of domestic violence).

"Sometimes," Maxine said, a trace of condescension creeping into her voice

now, "Todd likes to be out in public. Sometimes he doesn't".

"And right now?"

"He doesn't."

"But why would he mind being seen?" Tammy went on. "If there's nothing wrong

with him..."

Maxine hesitated, wondering how best to calm the suspicions she was clearly

arousing. She couldn't just make an excuse and jump off the phone; that would make

the Lauper woman even more curious than she already was. She had to maneuver the

conversation away from this dangerous area as carefully as possible.

"I'll tell you why," she said, dropping her voice a little, as though she was about to share something of real significance with Tammy. "He's got a secret

project in the works."

"Oh?" Tammy said. She didn't sound persuaded. "This isn't Warrior, is it? I

read that script, andó"

"No, it isn't Warrior. It's a very personal piece, which Todd is writing himself."

"He's writing it? Todd is writing something? He said in an interview with

People last July he hated writing. It was too much like hard work."

"Well, I lied a little," Maxine said. "He's not doing the actual writing.

He's working with somebody on the project. A very well-respected screenwriter,

actually. But he's pouring out his heart, so it'll be a very personal project."

There was a silence. Maxine waited. Had Tammy taken the bait or not?

"So this is autobiographical, this movie?"

"I didn't say it was a movie." Maxine said, taking some petty pleasure in

catching Tammy out. "It may end up on the screen, but right now he's just working

hard to get his feelings down. He and the writer, that is."

"Who is the writer?"

"I can't say."

"You know it would make all this very much more believable if you gave me

some more details," Tammy said.

That was it. Maxine lost her composure. How dare this little bitch suggest

her lies weren't believable?

"You know I've really said more than I should already, Tammy," she snapped.

And I've got six calls waiting. So if you'll excuse me"

"Wait—What am I going to tell the members?"

"What I just told you."

"You swear Todd's fine?"

"Good God, how many times? Yes. Todd is perfectly fine. In fact, he's never

Page 59

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

been better." She drew a deep breath, and attempted to calm herself a little before

she ended up saying something she regretted. "Look, Tammy, I really wish I could

tell you more. But this is a matter of Todd's privacy, as I'm sure you understand.

He needs a little time away from the pressure of being a celebrity, so he can work

on this project, and when he's finished I'm sure you'll be one of the

first to hear

about it. Now really, I've got to go."

"One more question," Tammy said.

"Yes."

"What's it called?"

"What's what called?" Maxine replied, playing for time.

"The script. Or the book. Or whatever it's going to be. What's it called?"

Oh shit, Maxine thought. Now she was in deep. Well, why the hell not give

the damn woman a title? She'd lied herself into a hole as it was, one more shovelful

wouldn't hurt. She pictured Todd in an image now indelibly inscribed in her mind's

eye, sitting waiting for Burrows to start cutting away the bandages. And the title

came: "The Blind Leading the Blind," she said.

"I don't like that," Tammy said, already proprietorial.

"Neither do I," Maxine replied, thinking not just of the title, but of this whole, sprawling, exhausting mess. "Trust me, Tammy. Neither do I."

Tammy Jayne Lauper lived on Elverta Road in Rio Linda, Sacramento, in a

one-story ranch-style house fifteen minutes from the Sacramento International

Airport, where her husband had worked for eight years as a baggage handler. They had

no kids, nor any hope of having any, this side of a miracle of Biblical proportions.

Arnie had a zero sperm count. Tammy didn't mind much. Just because God had given her

breasts the size of watermelons didn't mean she was born for motherhood. And of

course the absence of children left plenty of space in the house for all the files

relating to what Arnie sneeringly called Tammy's little "fan club."

"It isn't a fan club," Tammy had pointed out countless times, "it's an Appreciation Society." Arnie said Tammy wasn't no appreciator, she was a fan, plain

and simple, and he knew every time they'd used to sleep together and she closed her

eyes it was that dickhead Pickett she'd been imagining on top of her fat ass, and

that was the whole unvarnished truth of it. When Arnie got to talking like that,

Tammy would just tune him out. He'd stop eventually, when he knew he she wasn't

listening; go back to sitting in front of the TV with a beer.

The main center of the Todd Pickett Appreciation Society's operations was

the front bedroom. The room she and Arnie slept in was considerably smaller, but as

she'd pointed out to him, it didn't really matter since all they did was sleep in

it. They still had a double bed, though God knows why; he never

touched her; and a

couple of years back she'd stopped wanting him to. The third bedroom (and all the

closets), were used for storage: files of clippings, issues of the fanzine

(quarterly for the first year, then monthly, now quarterly again), photographs and

biographies to be distributed to new members, copies of press kits from every film

Todd had ever made, in twenty-six languages. Downstairs, in what would have been the

family room, she kept the Collection. This was made up of items related to Todd and

his career, all of them relatively rare, some one-of-a-kind items. Hanging in

zipped-up plastic laundry bags were articles of clothing made for the cast and crew

of his pictures. On the mantelpiece, still sealed in their boxes were six Todd

Pickett dolls that had been the hot thing to own during his teen-idol period, the

boxes signed by Todd. Preserved in a vacuum pack were several unused latex makeup

pieces for his Oscar-nominated performance as the maimed firefighter in *The Burning*

Year. She didn't ever look at those. She'd been warned that they deteriorated when

they were exposed to sunlight.

The collection also contained a comprehensive library of scripts for his

movies, with all their addenda, including one marked up in Todd's handwriting, along

with a complete set of novelizations of the movies, leather-bound with gilt

lettering. There were also credit-listings on all the crews who worked with him,

costume sketches and call-sheets, and of course, posters of every size and

nationality. If the Smithsonian ever wanted to open a wing dedicated to the life and

career of Todd Pickett, Tammy had once boasted, they need look no further than her

front room. Once, she'd attempted to enumerate the items she owned. It was something

in the region of seventeen thousand three hundred, not including those pieces of

which she had more than one copy.

It was to this shrine that Tammy had come after her frustrating exchange

Page 60

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

with Maxine Frizelle. She closed and locked the door (though Arnie would not be back

from work and his after-hours carousing for several hours), and sat down to think.

After a few minutes, turning over the conversation she'd just had, she went to the

very back of the room, and took from its place amongst the treasure-

trove a box of

photographs. These were her special pride and joy: pictures of Todd (fourteen of

them in all) which she'd managed to buy from somebody who'd known the still

photographer on Todd's fourth picture, Life Lessons. This was Todd's coming-of-age

picture: the one in which he'd changed from being a Boy to being a Man. Of course,

his smile would always be a boy's smile, that was part of its magic, but after Life

Lessons he went on to play tougher roles: a homecoming soldier, a firelighter, a man

wrongfully accused of his own wife's murder. Here then, caught in the moment before

his cinematic adulthood, was the boy-man of Tammy's dreams. She had even purchased

the negatives from which the series of pictures had been printed, and along with

them the assurance from the person she'd got them from that they had been 'lost' in

the production offices before they were ever seen by the director, the producer or

by Todd himself. In short, she had the only copies.

Their rarity wasn't the reason she valued them so highly however. What made

them her special treasureóthe quality that made her return to them over and over,

when Arnie was out at work, and she knew she had time for
reverieówas the fact that

the photographer had caught his subject unawares. Well, shirtless and
unawares. Todd

was sleek and pale, his body not heavy at all, not all muscle and veins
popping out,

just a nice, ordinary body; the body of the boy next door if the boy
next door

happened to be perfect. She had never seen a body she thought so
beautiful. Then

there was his face. Oh that face! She'd seen literally thousands of
photographs of

Todd in the last eleven yearsóand to her adoring eyes he was
handsome in every

single one of themóbut in these particular pictures he was something
more than

handsome. There was a certain lost look in his eyes, that allowed her
to indulge the

belief that if she'd been there at that momentóif he'd seen her and
looked at her

with the same forsaken feeling in his heart as was in his
eyesóeverything in her

life would have been different; and maybe, just maybe, everything in
his.

When she was thinking clearly, she knew all this was romantic
nonsense. She

was a plain woman; and, even though she'd shed thirty-two pounds in
the last two

years, was still thirty overweight. How could she hope to compare

with the glossy

beauties Todd had romanced, both on screen and off? Still she allowed herself the

indulgence, once in a while. It made life in Sacramento a little more bearable to

know that her secret glimpses of Todd were always there, hidden away, waiting for

her. And best of all, nobody else had them. They were hers and hers alone.

There was one other wonderful thing about the fourteen pictures: they had

been snapped in such quick succession that if she leafed through them fast enough

she could almost create the illusion of movement. She did that now, while she

thought about the way Maxine had talked to her on the phone. That nonsense about

Todd going away to write his life story, or whatever she'd said it was going to be;

it didn't ring true. It simply wasn't like Todd to be so inaccessible. Every

vacation he'd takenóin India, in New Guinea, in the Amazon, for God's sakeóhe'd been

spotted. Somebody had had a camera, and he'd posed; smiled, waved, goofed around. It

just wasn't like him to disappear like this.

But what could she do about it? She wasn't going to get any answers out of

anybody close to Todd: they'd all trot out the same story. She'd already exhausted

her contacts at the studios, all of whom claimed not to have seen Todd in a while.

Even over at Paramount, where he was supposedly making his next picture, nobody had

seen him in many months. Nor, according to her most reliable source over there, the

secretary to Sherry Lansing's assistant, were there any meetings on the books,

either with Todd or any of his production team. It was all very strange, and it made

Tammy afraid for her man. Suppose they were covering something up? Suppose there'd

been an accident, or an assault, and Todd had been hurt? Suppose he was in a

hospital bed somewhere on life-support, his life slipping away, while all the sons

of bitches who'd made fortunes off his talent were lying to themselves and anyone

who'd listen, pretending it was going to be okay? Things like that happened all the

time; especially in Hollywood. Everyone lied there; it was a way of life.

Her thoughts circled on these terrible images for an hour or more, while she

sat amongst her treasures. At last, she came to a momentous decision. She could do

nothing to solve this mystery sitting here in Sacramento. She needed

to go out to

California, and confront some of these people. It was easy to tell somebody a lie on

the telephone. It was harder to do when you were face to face with someone; when you

Page 61

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

were looking into their eyes.

She took one last look through the sequence of photographs, lingering on the

last of the fourteen, the one in which Todd's gaze was closest to making contact

with the camera. Another shot, and he would have been looking directly at her. Their

eyes, as it were, would have met. She smiled at him, kissed his picture, then put

the photographs away, tucked the box out of sight and went through to the kitchen to

call Arnie at the airport, and tell him what she planned to do. He was in the middle

of his shift, and couldn't come to the phone. She left a message for him to call

her; then she made a reservation on Southwest for the flight to Los Angeles, and

booked a room in a little hotel on Wilshire Boulevard, which she'd stayed in once

before when she'd come into LA for a Todd Pickett convention.

The flight was scheduled at 3:10 that afternoon, and was to get into Los

Angeles at 4:15, but the departure was delayed for almost two hours, and then they

circled over LAX for almost three quarters of an hour before they could land, so it

wasn't until half-past seven that she stepped out of the airport into the warm,

sweet-smog air of her beloved's city.

She didn't know what she was going to do, now she was here; how or where she

was going to begin. But at least she wasn't sitting at home brooding. She was closer

to him, here, whatever Maxine Frizelle had said about him being off in some faraway

place. That was a lie; Tammy knew it in her bones. He was here. And if he was any in

any trouble, then by God she would do her best to help him, because whatever anybody

might say she knew one thing for certain: there wasn't a soul on earth who cared for

the well-being of Todd Pickett more than she. And somewhere, tucked away in a

shameful corner of her head she almost hoped that there was some conspiracy here;

because that would give her a chance to come to his rescue; to save him from people

like Frizelle, and make him understand who really cared about him. Oh, wouldn't that

be something! She didn't dare think about it too much; it made her sick with guilt

and anticipation. She shouldn't be wishing anything but the best for her Todd. And

yet the same thought kept creeping back: that somewhere in this city he was waiting

for her—even if he didn't know it yet; waiting to be saved and comforted. Yes, she

dared think it: perhaps even loved.

EIGHT

Todd and Marco had settled into life at the Hideaway in the Canyon quite

easily. Todd occupied the enormous master bedroom which had (as Maxine had boasted)

an extraordinary view down the canyon. On clear days, of which there were many in

that early March, Todd could sit at his window and watch the ocean, glittering

beyond the towers of Century City. On exceptional days, he could even make out the

misty shape of Catalina Island.

Marco had taken a much smaller bedroom on the floor below, with an adjacent

silting room, and did much as he had in the Bel Air home: that is, served with

uncanny prescience the needs of his boss, and having provided such services as were

required, then retreated into near-invisibility.

The area was much quieter than Bel Air. There seemed to be no through

traffic on the single road that wound up through the Canyon, so apart from the

occasional sound of a police helicopter passing over, or a siren drifting up from

Sunset, Todd heard nothing from the city that lay such a short distance below. What

he did hear, at night, were coyotes, who seemed to haunt the slopes of the canyon in

significant numbers. On some nights, standing on one of the many balconies of his

new mansion nursing a drink and a cigarette, he would hear a lone animal begin its

urgent yapping on the opposite slope of the canyon, only to hear its call answered

from another spot, then another, the din rising into a whooping chorus from the

darkness all around him, so that it seemed the entire canyon was alive with them.

They'd had coyotes up in Bel Air too, of course. Their proximity to the house would

always send Dempsey into a frenzy of deep-chest barking, as though to announce that

the dog of the house was much larger than he was, in reality.

"I'm surprised we've got so many coyotes up here," Marco said, after one

particularly noisy night. "You'd think they'd go somewhere with a lot more garbage.

I mean, they're scavengers, right?"

"Maybe they like it here," Todd observed.

"Yeah, I guess."

"There's no people to fuck with them."

"Except us."

Page 62

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"We won't be here long," Todd said.

"You don't sound too happy about that."

"Well I guess I could get used to it here."

"Have you been up on the ridge yet?"

"No. I haven't had the energy."

"You should go up there. Take a look. There's quite a view."

The exchange, brief as it was, put the thought of a trip up the hill into

Todd's head. He needed to start exercising again, as Maxine had pointed out, or he

was going to find that his face was all nicely healed up and his body had gone to

fat. He didn't believe for a minute that his face was anywhere near being healed,

but he took her point. He was drinking too much and eating too many Elvis Midnight

Specials (peanut butter, jelly, crispy bacon and sliced banana on Wonder Bread

sandwiches, deep fried in butter) for the good of his waistline. His pants were

feeling tight, and his assówhen he glimpsed it in the mirrorówas looking fleshy.

In a while he'd have to get back to some serious training: start running every morning; maybe have his gym equipment brought over from the Bel Air house and

installed in the guest-house. But in the meantime he'd ease back into the swing of

things with a few exploratory walks: one of which, he promised himself, would be up

the top of the hill, to see what the view was like when you got to the end of the

road.

Burrows and Nurse Karyn came every other day to change the dressings and

assess the condition of his face. Though Burrows claimed that the healing process

was going well, Burrows claimed, his manner remained subdued and cautious: it was

clear that the whole sorry business had taken a toll upon his confidence. His

sun-bed tan could not conceal a certain sickliness in his pallor; and the skin

around his eyes and mouth, taut from a series of tucks and tightenings, had an

unnatural rigidity to it, like a teak mask under which another, more fragile man,

was trapped. Superficially, he remained unfailingly optimistic about Todd's

prognosis; he was certain there would be no permanent scarring. Indeed he was even

willing to chance the opinion that things were going to work out 'as planned', and

that Todd was going to emerge from the whole experience looking ten years younger.

"So how long is it going to be before I can take off the bandages?"

"Another week, I'd say."

"And after that...how long before I'm back to normal again?"

"I don't want to make any promises," Burrows said, "but inside a month. Is

there some great urgency here?"

"Yeah, I want people to see me. I want them to know I'm not dead."

"Surely nobody believes that," Burrows said.

Todd summoned Marco. "Where are those tabloids you brought in?" he asked.

"The doctor's not been reading the trash in his waiting-room recently."

Marco left the room and reappeared with five magazines, dropping them on the

table beside Burrows. The top one had a blurred, black and white photograph of a

burial procession, obviously taken with an extremely long-distance lens. The

headline read: Superstar Todd Pickett Buried in Secret Ceremony. The magazine

beneath had an unsmiling picture of Todd's ex-girlfriend, Wilhemina Bosch, and

announced, as though from her grieving lips: "I never even had a chance to tell him

good-bye." And underneath, a third magazine boasted that it contained Todd Pickett's

Last Words. "I saw Christ standing at his death-bed, claims nurse." Burrows didn't

bother with the others.

"Who starts bullshit like this?"

"You tell me," Todd replied.

"I hope you're not implying that it was somebody in my surgery, because I

assure you we've been vigorousó"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Todd said. "You're not responsible for anything. I know.

See? I finally got smart. I read the small print."

"Frankly, I don't see where your problem lies. All you'd have to do is make

one call, tell them who you are, and the rumors would be laid to rest."

"And what would he say?" Marco asked.

"It's obvious. He'd say: I'm Todd Pickett and I'm alive and well, thank you

very much."

"And then what?" Todd said. "When they want to come to take a photograph to

confirm that everything's fine? Or they want an interview, face-to-face. Face. To.

Face. With this?"

Page 63

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

His face was presently unbandaged. He stood up and went to the mirror. "I

look like I went ten rounds with a heavyweight."

"I can only assure you that the swelling is definitely going down. It's just

going to take time. And the quality of the new epidermis is first-rate. I believe

you're going to be very pleased at the end of everything."

Todd said nothing for a moment. Then, with a kind of simple sincerity he'd

seldomóif everóachieved in front of a camera, he turned and said to Burrows: "You

know what I wish?" Burrows shook his head. "I wish I'd never laid eyes on you, you

dickhead."

NINE

Tammy knew only a very few people in Los Angeles, all of them members of the

Appreciation Society, but she decided not to alert anybody to the fact that she'd

come into town. They'd all want to help her with her investigations, and this was

something she preferred to do alone, at least at the outset.

She checked herself into the little hotel on Wilshire Boulevard, within a

few hundred yards of the Westwood Memorial Park, where a host of stars and

almost-stars were buried or interred. She'd made her rounds of the famous who rested

there on her last visit. Donna Reed and Natalie Wood were amongst them, so was

Darryl F. Zanuck and Oscar Levant. But the Park's real claim to fameóthe presence

that brought sightseers from all over the worldówas Marilyn Monroe, who was laid to

rest in a bland concrete crypt distinguished only by the number of floral tributes

it attracted. The crypt beside it was still empty, keptóso it was saidófor the

mortal remains of Hugh Heffner.

Tammy had not much enjoyed her visit to the Park. In fact it had depressed

her a little. She certainly had no intention of going back this time. It was the

living she was concerned with on this visit, not the dead.

When she was settled in she called Arnie, gave him her room number in case

of emergency, and told him she'd be back in a couple of days at most. She heard him

pop a can of beer while she was talkingónot, to judge by his slightly

slurred

speech, his first of the night. He'd be fine without her, she thought. Probably

happier.

She ordered up some room-service food, and then sat plotting how she'd

proceed the next day. Her first line of enquiry would be the most direct: she'd go

up to Todd's home in Bel Air and try to find out whether or not he was there. His

address was no secret. In fact she had pictures of every room in the house,

including the ensuite bathroom with the sunken tub, taken by the realtor when the

house was still on the market, though of course it had been remodeled since and its

layout had probably changed. Of course, her chances of even getting to the front

doorómuch less of seeing himówere remote. But it would be foolish of her not to try.

Maybe she'd catch him going out for a jog, or spot him standing at a window. Then

all her concerns would be laid to rest and she would be able to go back to

Sacramento happy, knowing that he was alive and well.

She'd hired a car at the airport, and had planned to drive up to Bel Air the

evening she arrived, but after the hassles of the delayed flight she was

simply too

tired, so she went to bed at ten and rose bright and early. The room service offered

at the hotel was nothing special and she liked a good breakfast so she crossed over

Wilshire and went into Westwood Village, found herself a diner, and ate heartily:

scrambled eggs, bacon, hash browns, white toast and coffee. While she ate she

skimmed People and USA Today. Both had pieces about the upcoming Oscars, which were

now only three days away. Todd had never won an Oscar (which Tammy believed to be

absolute proof of the corruption of the Academy) but he'd been nominated four years

ago for Lost Rites, one of his less popular pictures. She'd been very proud of him:

he'd done fine work in the movie and she'd thought he had a crack at winning.

Watching the ceremony had been nearly impossible. Her heart had hammered so hard as

Susan Sarandon, who'd been presenting the award, had fumbled with the envelope;

Tammy thought she was going to pass out from anticipation before the winner was even

named. And then of course, Sarandon had named the winner, and it hadn't been Todd.

The cameras had been on him throughout the whole envelope-fumbling routine, and

there'd been a moment between the naming of the winner and his applauding when his

disappointment had been perfectly clear: at least to someone who knew the language

of his face as well as Tammy.

Page 64

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

She'd only seen one of the movies in this year's race, and she'd only gone

to that because Tom Hanks was in it, and he seemed such a likable man. She skimmed

the articles rather than reading them, hoping maybe there'd be some reassuring

mention of Todd. But there was nothing.

Breakfast finished, she walked back to the hotel, left a message for Arnie

at the airport, just to say all was fine, and then picked up a map at the front desk

in case her sense of direction failed her. Thus prepared, she set off for Todd's

home.

It took twenty-five minutes driving through the heavy morning traffic to get

up into the narrow, winding streets of Bel Air. There wasn't much to see; most of

the mansions were hidden behind high walls, bristling with spikes and video cameras.

But there was no doubting the fact that she was in a very select neighborhood. The

cars parked on the narrow thoroughfares were all expensive (in one spot she

maneuvered past a coffee-and-cream Rolls Royce on the left and a red Porsche on the

right). On another street she encountered some glamorously-hooded superstar out

running, a black limo following close behind, presumably carrying the bottled water

and the granola bars.

What must it be like, she wondered as she drove, to be so pampered and

cosseted? To know that if there was no toilet paper in the house, no ice cream in

the freezer, then it was somebody else's damn job to go and get it. Never to have to

worry about taxes or mortgage payments. Never to wake up at three in the morning and

think: Who am I? I'm nobody. If I died tomorrow nobody would really notice, nobody

would really care.

Of course she knew there were plenty of responsibilities that came along

with all this wealth and comfort. And they took their toll on some folks: it drove

them to drink and drugs and adultery. It was hard to be idolized and scrutinized.

But she'd never had much sympathy for the complainers. So, people paid you millions

to see you smile, and it made you feel inadequate. Tough shit.

She found Todd's house readily enough. There was no number, but she recognized the castellated wall and the square lamps on either side of the gate. She

drove on up the street, found a parking spot, and wandered back towards the house,

trying to look as inconspicuous as any two hundred and three-pound woman in orange

polyester pants could. When she reached the gates she saw that there was a car

parked in the driveway, twenty yards inside the gates, its trunk open. There was no

sign of anyone loading or unloading. She watched from the street for a minute or

two, her courage alternately rising then failing her. She couldn't just go up to the

gate and ring the bell. What would she say? Hello, I'm Todd's Number One Fan, and I

was wondering if he was feeling okay? Ridiculous! They'd think she was a stalker and

have her arrested. In fact they might be watching her right now, on a hidden camera:

calling the police.

She stood there, quietly cursing herself for not having thought this through

properly before she came up here. She didn't know whether to stand

her ground, and

make the best of this nightmarish situation, or attempt to casually slip away.

Then a door slammed, somewhere out of sight. She wanted to make a run for

it, but she too far from the car to make a quick retreat. All she could do was stand

there and hope to God there was nobody looking at the security monitors at that

particular moment.

Now came the sound of somebody whistling, and seconds later the whistler

himself stepped into view. Tammy recognized him instantly. It was Marco Caputo,

Todd's assistant and bodyguard. She'd encountered the man twice before, once at the

premiere party for The Burning Year, and the second time in Las Vegas, when Todd had

been named Actor of the Year at ShoWest. She'd very politely presented her

credentials as the President of the Appreciation Society, and politely asked Caputo

if she could have a minute to talk with Todd. On both occasions he'd been rude to

her. The second time, in fact, he'd called her 'a crazy bitch', which she'd

complained to Maxine Frizelle about. Maxine had apologized in a halfhearted way and

said it would never happen again, but Tammy wasn't about to put Caputo's temper to

the test a third time, especially under these dubious circumstances.

Before he could look up and see her she backed off into the thicket of blackberry bushes that grew unchecked on the other side of the street. She kept her

eyes on him at all times; he was too busy with his present labors to notice her,

thank God; and now, hidden in the bushes, she had the perfect vantage point from

which to observe him as he went back and forth between the house and the car. He was

loading his vehicle up with an odd assortment of things: including several awards

Page 65

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

she knew belonged to Todd. He was also removing some other items: a variety of fancy

ornaments, a marijuana plant in a pot, some framed photographs. All this, plus nine

or ten sealed cardboard boxes, carefully placed in the trunk or on the back seat of

his car. There was no sign of Todd through the process; nor did she hear any

exchange from inside the house. If Todd was here, he was not engaged in conversation

with Marco. But her instincts told her he was not here.

For fully a quarter of an hour she watched him work and finallyóputting all

the evidence togetheróshe came to the conclusion that she was witnessing an act of

theft. Of course, her dislike of the thief factored into her assessment, but there

was no doubt that Caputo looked furtive as he went about his labors. Every now and

then he'd glance up as if he was afraid he was being watched (perhaps he sensed that

he was); and when he did she saw that his face was ill-shaven, and his eyes heavy.

Sleep wasn't coming too easily of late.

She had already decided what she was going to do well before he'd finished

with his felony. She'd follow him when he departed and find out where he was

dropping off all his booty. Then she'd call the police and have him arrested.

Hopefully that would improve Maxine's low opinion of her. She might even find

herself trusted enough to be invited into the charmed circle around Todd. Well,

perhaps that was a little too much to hope for. But at the very least she'd be

stopping Caputo profiting from his theft.

With the car now filled to capacity, Caputo slammed the trunk, and headed

back to the house, presumably to lock up. Once he'd gone Tammy disentangled herself

from the blackberry bushes and hurried back to her own car. It was getting warm. She

felt sweat running from beneath her breasts, and her underwear was bunched in the

groove of her butt. She turned the air-conditioning to its coldest setting, then

drove on up the street a little way until she had sufficient room to turn around,

and came back down in time to see Caputo's black Lexus easing out of the driveway.

He was the only occupant of the vehicle.

Keeping her distance, she followed the Lexus down through the maze of Bel

Air's walls and cameras to Sunset Boulevard. She almost lost her quarry at the

lights, but luckily the eastbound traffic on Sunset was heavy, and with a little

discourteous driving she was able to keep him in sight, finally catching up with him

again. He drove with ease and impatience, slipping lanes to overtake tardy drivers;

but she was a match for him. Wherever he was going, she was going to be on his

thieving tail.

She had no time to consult the maps she'd picked up, she was too busy keeping her eyes on him. So when he suddenly swung a left, and took

off up into the

hills again, she instantly lost all sense of where they were headed. The traffic

soon grew sparse, the streets narrow and serpentine.

Once he halted at a stop sign and he looked back over his shoulder. She was

certain he'd realized he was being followed, and prepared herself for a confrontation. But no; something he'd laid on the back seat had moved, it seemed,

and he was simply leaning over to reposition it. The job done he then proceeded on

his way, and she continued to follow, at a discreet distance.

The road wound so tightly on itself as it ascended that she let him slip out

of sight several times rather than risk his realizing he was being pursued. But she

didn't fear losing him. Unlike Bel Air, which was made up of a warren of small

streets, the Canyon into which they were climbing seemed to have only one

thoroughfare, and they were both on it. What little sign of habitation she saw

was a wall, and occasionally a gate in a wall suggested this was not particularly

well-fancied real estate, which was surprising given its location. The trees had

been allowed to grow over the road, in some places intertwining their branches to

form a leafy vault overhead. In one spot, where a number of tall palm trees grew

close to the road, fallen fronds lay in a brittle carpet on the pot-holed tarmac.

She began to get just a little anxious. Although she reassured herself that

she was just a couple of minutes' drive away from Sunset, this felt like a very

different world; a backwater, where who knew what went on? That very fact, of

course, supported her shadier suspicions. This was a perfect place for an illegal

transaction: there didn't appear to be anybody here to witness Caputo's dealing.

Except, of course, herself.

The black Lexus had been out of sight for quite a while when, as she turned

a corner, she came upon it parked so badly that she might have ploughed into the

back of it had she not acted quickly to avert the collision. She swung wide of it,

glancing back to see Caputo manually opening a pair of immense gates. The thief

Page 66

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

started to look round at her, but she put her foot on the accelerator and was out of

sight before he could fix his gaze. She drove on a considerable

distance, but the

road came to a dead-end, which left her with two options. One, to turn round and

make a conspicuous retreat past the gates, so that he was certain she'd gone; or to

hope that the urgency of his mission would make him careless about her presence, and

by the time she'd trekked back to his thieves' lair she would have been forgotten.

She decided on the latter. She'd come too far to turn and run off now with her tail

between her legs.

The first thing she noticed when she got out of her car was the deep hush of

the canyon. Though the Bel Air house was nicely situated, away from the din of any

major thoroughfare, she'd still been aware that she was in the middle of a city. But

here the only sound was the music of birds, and insects in the grass. She was

careful not to slam the door. Leaving the key in the car, and the door just slightly

ajar in case she needed to make a fast getaway, she headed back down the street to

the gate.

There were no cameras mounted along the perimeter this time, which surprised

her; but then perhaps she was walking into a nest of infamous felons,

and everyone

in the vicinity knew to keep their distance. If so if the people Marco was doing

business with were real villains so then she was in trouble. She was alone up here; and

nobody knew where she'd gone.

This is insanity, she thought to herself as she walked. But she kept on

walking. The prospect of coming out of this the unlikely heroine was simply too

attractive to be turned down. Yes, there was a risk. But then perhaps it was time

she took a few, instead of hiding away in her house and doting on her picture

collection. She was in the thick of things now, and she wasn't going to allow

herself to turn her back on this adventure. If she did if she got in her car and

drove away wouldn't she always wonder how different things might have been if for

once in her life she'd had the courage of her instincts?

Arnie had always called her a dreamer, and maybe he was right about that.

Maybe she'd been living in a dream world for too long, with her little museum of

photographs to dote on; hoping though it could never happen, of course that one day,

when she flicked through the pictures, Todd would look at her and smile at her and

invite her into his world, to stay. It was a silly dream, and she knew it.
Whereas

being here now, walking on the hard street in the hot sun, with an old
cracked wall

to the left of heróall that was real, perfectly real. So perhaps today
was the day

when the photographs became real too; the day when she finally
found her way to a

man of flesh and blood; to a Todd who would return her look, finally;
see her and

smile at her.

The thought made her quicken her step; and she arrived at the gates

breathing a little faster, exhilarated by the prospect that with the
hazards she

imagined the house contained there was one possibility she could not
properly

imagine (though Lord knows she'd tried to conjure it over and over):
the image of

her idol, appearing before her, and her with so much to say she
wouldn't know where

to begin.

TEN

She scanned the area around the gates (the bars of which were
exquisitely

interwoven with both wrought iron vines and the living variety), in
search of the

inevitable security cameras, but to her surprise found none. They were
either

extremely well concealed, or else the owners of this house were so certain that

their Canyon was safe from visitors that they didn't feel the need of them. More

surprisingly still, the gates had no locks; she was able to push one of them open

wide enough for her to slip through.

She could see some of the house from where she stood, though it was mostly

hidden by the great riot of shrubs and trees that lined the curving driveway.

Caputo's car was parked close to the front door. The trunk was open, and he was now

unloading his loot. She wished she'd brought a camera; then she could have simply

photographed him in the middle of his illicit transaction, and left with her

evidence. But as it was, she felt obliged to get a little closer, and find out who

he was dealing with. If she didn't have some further evidence, it was going to end

up being his word against hers; and she, after all, was the trespasser here. Her

accusations weren't going to carry much weight unless she could be very specific

Page 67

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

about what she had witnessed.

She waited until Caputo had gone into the house, and then crept towards the

front door, covering perhaps half the distance between door and gate before the

thief strode out of the house again, and returned to the car. She ducked for cover

behind a Bird of Paradise, its sickly sap gummy beneath her heels. From there she

watched while Caputo hauled another load of booty up out of the trunk. As he did so

there was a shout from inside the house; the voice curiously muted.

"Marco! This picture's cracked."

"Shit."

Marco set down the box he was lifting from the trunk, and went back to the

doorstep. As he did so, the owner of the picture, and of that curiously muffled

voice, came out of the house. The sight of him made Tammy's heart quicken. First, he

was shirtless, his slacks hanging low on his hips. His torso was tanned, but far

from trim. He looked to have a body that had once been well cared for but was now

quickly going to seed. The muscles of his upper arms were soft, and he had the

beginnings of love-handles spilling over his belt. His face was swathed in bandages.

They weren't tight to his skull, like the bandaging on a mummy. They

were more

irregular; patches of gauze held against his cheeks and brow and jaw and neck, with

lengths of bandaging running all the way around his head to secure them and locks of

his lush dark hair stuck up out of the bandages like tufts from the pate of a clown.

All in all, that was what he resembled, with his ill-fitting pants, and his little

paunch: something from a circus. Part clown, part freak.

He lifted up the picture for Marco to see. "Look."

"It's just the glass that's cracked. Easy fix."

"You're careless."

"I said I'd get it fixed, boss."

"That's not the point. You're fucking careless."

Only as the clown returned into the house, dropping the offending picture

against the door-jamb for Marco to pick up, did Tammy realize who she'd just seen.

It was Todd. Oh my Lord...

It was Todd standing there on the doorstep, with his face all bandaged up

and his stomach hanging over his trousers.

Tammy heard herself gasping. She put her hand over her mouth to silence the

sound, but she needn't have bothered. The men's fractious exchange

had escalated

into an argument loud enough to drown out any noise she might make.

"You're so fucking clumsy."

"Some of the stuff slipped off the back seat, that's all. No big deal. It was an accident."

"Well, there's too many fucking accidents around here for my liking."

"Hey...I said I'm sorry."

"It's a picture of the house where I was born."

"Yeah? Well I'll get a new frame for it on Monday." The exchange about the

broken glass apparently came to a halt there. Tammy watched while Caputo stood on

the step, staring into the house, muttering something under his breath. Whatever it

was, it wasn't for Todd's ears; he was just quietly letting off steam. He leaned on

the car, lit a cigarette and soothed himself with a smoke.

Tammy didn't dare move. Even though Caputo wasn't looking directly at her,

there was a better than even chance that he'd catch sight of her if she broke cover.

All she could do was stay where she was, her mind filled with feverish explanations

for what she'd just seen.

Obviously something horrible had happened to Todd, but what? Her

first

thought was that one of his ex-girlfriends had tried to harm him (he'd always had

poor judgment when it came to women). Either that or there'd been some kind of

accident (was that what his remark about "too many accidents" had meant?). Whatever

it was, he was in terrible pain, or else why would he be acting the way he just had?

Her heart went out to him. And to be stuck up here in this God-forsaken place with

only that cretin Caputo for company: it would drive anybody crazy.

Finally, Caputo dropped his cigarette, ground it out, and went back to his

work. Tammy waited until he'd disappeared inside the house and stepped out of her

hiding place. What now? Back to the gate, up the street to her car, and away?

Clearly that was the most sensible thing to do. But that would mean leaving without

finding what was wrong with her poor Todd. She couldn't do that. It was as simple as

that. She couldn't do it. She was going to have to find a way into the house, and

then discover some means to speak to him before Caputo intervened. Obviously the

front door wasn't the way to go; not with the thug standing right there. She was

going to have to try around the back. She retraced her sticky steps a few yards, and

then crossed to the corner of the house. A paving stone path led down the flank of

the house. It was a narrow, steep descent, and it plainly hadn't been used in many

years. Roots had cracked the stones, and shrubbery choked the path in several

places. It took her fully ten minutes to make her cautious descent, but it delivered

her into a far more beautiful spot than she'd expected. Somebody had once created a

wonderful garden back here; and now, with spring early this year throughout the

state, the place was glorious. Everywhere there were bursts of brilliant color and

hummingbirds, going from flower to flower, and butterflies, drying their

newly-exposed wings to the sun.

The beauty of the place put all thoughts of jeopardy out of Tammy's head, at

least for a few moments. She made her way through the bushes to what had once been

an enormous lawn although there were so many wild flowers in the tall grass, and so

much grass sprouting in the border, that lawn and border had become virtually

indistinguishable and looked back up at the house, her gaze going from window to

window, balcony to balcony, to see if there was anybody watching her. She saw

nobody, so she grew a little more confident and strode out into the middle of the

lawn so that she could get herself a good look at the house. It was much larger than

she'd assumed from the front, and even in its dilapidated state it was an, elegant

place, the curves of its balconies echoing one another, the ironwork of its railings

delicate.

That said, it was a strange house for Todd to be living in. She knew how

hard he'd worked to perfect his residence in Bel Air (four architects; two interior

designers; millions of dollars spent): so why was he here? There could only be one

explanation. He was in hiding. He didn't want anyone to see him in his wounded

state. She understood the logic of that. There were some people some of his fans who

wanted to think he was perfect. Luckily she wasn't one of those people. Far from it.

The fact that he was here, all locked away, hurting and angry, made her feel all the

more love for him. If she got a chance, she'd tell him so. If he'd let her, she'd

peel those stifling bandages off his face. She didn't care what he looked like

underneath; it was still her Todd, wasn't it? Still the man she idolized. For once

the fact that her breasts were too big would be a Godsend. They'd be a comfortable

place for him to lay his hurt head. She could rock him and keep him there, safe and

sound.

From the corner of her eye, she saw something move in the foliage. The

blissful imaginings fled. Very slowly, she looked towards the shrubs where she'd

seen the motion. The sun was bright, the shadows dark and solid. The leaves shook in

the light breeze. Was that what she'd seen? The leaves shaking? Apparently so, for

there was nothing else visible.

She returned her gaze to the house, looking for the best way for her to get

in. There were no open windows on the garden level—at least none that she could

see—and the doors all looked to be securely locked. She pushed her way through a

line of shrubs so as to see if the house was any more vulnerable elsewhere, but the

foliage grew thicker around her as she proceeded, and then she somehow managed to

become disorientated, because when she turned back to try another way she found that

she'd lost sight of both the lawn and the house. She felt like Alice, suddenly

shrinking away; the flowers around her were huge, like sunflowers, only purple and

scarlet, and the scent they gave off was achingly sweet. They grew so tall, however,

and in such preternatural numbers, that she could not see the house at all—not a

chimney pot, not a balcony. Her only hope was to make a guess at the direction in

which the house lay, which she did, plunging on through the enormous blooms. But her

guesswork was hopelessly amiss. The shrubbery simply thickened, the sunflowers

giving way to bushes whose branches carried bell-shaped yellow blossoms, almost the

size of her head. She couldn't yell for help, of course; that would bring Caputo

running. She had no choice but to head on in the same hopeless fashion, until at

last the thicket cleared somewhat, and she had sight of the sky again.

Emerging from the shrubbery she was instantly on her guard, in case she'd

come to a place where she could be spotted. But she needn't have worried. Her

travels had brought her down the hill, and put a line of cypress trees (which she

could not remember moving through) between herself and the house. Only one

reasonably sensible option presented itself. Directly ahead of her was a narrow

pathway as overgrown as the one that had brought her down the side of the house. She

had no idea where it led, but it was a pathway; it implied that others had been here

Page 69

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

before her, perhaps in the same predicament, and this trail of trodden ground marked

their exit. If it had worked for them, why not for her? Pulling pieces of twig and

blossom from her hair and blouse as she went, she followed the path.

She suddenly had a mental picture of herself in her present state. What a

sight she must be, stumbling out of the greenery like some crazed explorer. What the

hell was she thinking of? Out there on the open street it had been easy to talk

herself into this trespass. Now she was beginning to think the whole idea wasn't so

smart. It wasn't the fact that she was lost in the environs of the house that

discomfited her: she'd find her way back to the street eventually. Nor was she

particularly concerned about the threat posed by Caputo; not now that

she knew Todd

was here. Caputo might yell a bit, and threaten her with the police if she didn't

leave; but he was more bark than bite. No, what had brought her to a halt was the

distinct sense that she wasn't alone out here in the undergrowth. There was somebody

close by. She couldn't see anybody, but the feeling was too strong to be ignored.

She slowly started to turn on her heel, viewing the scene around her.

"Whoever you are..." she said, doing her best to keep her voice as quiet and

non-confrontational as possible, "please show yourself."

There was a motion in the undergrowth, five or six yards from where she

stood. Somebody or something had apparently moved from their hiding place. There was

more than one creature in the vicinity, she guessed; it was several. There was

foliage moving all around her now, as though those hiding in the shrubbery were

getting ready to show themselves.

She started walking again, faster than before, and her walking brought her

into a place where the shrubbery cleared a little, presenting her with a most

unexpected sight. There were perhaps seven or eight cages, arranged on either side

of a wide, flagged walkway. They varied in size. The largest might have housed two

horses and left some room for maneuver, the smallest was perhaps half that size.

Vines had wrapped themselves around the bars and fell here and there, in tattered

green curtains, as though to conceal what lay inside the cages. In fact, there was

nothing to conceal. The occupants of this menagerie had long since disappeared.

She moved down the walkway cautiously, increasingly certain that her

stalkers were matching her motion step by step on the other side of the cages. Some

of the cages had high wooden bars, which suggested they'd housed small monkeys.

Others were built more robustly, their bars twice or three times the thickness. What

kind of animal had been held in a cage like this? It was too small to comfortably

accommodate a rhinoceros, or even a bear or tiger. And in a day rife with unanswered

questions, here was another one: what had happened to the occupants of this tawdry

private zoo? Was there a graveyard somewhere in the thicket where the animals had

been laid to rest? Or had their owner set them free to roam the Canyon?

She was almost at the end of the walkway now. The final cage on her right

was in a much better state than the others. Foliage had been interwoven with the

bars so cunningly that there was practically nothing of the interior visible. Its

gate, which was similarly covered, stood a little ajar. Tammy peered in. The air

inside smelled of some subtle perfume, its source the candles which were set in a

little cluster at the far end of the cage. There was a small cot set against the

wall to her right, somewhat incongruously made up with two oversized red silk

pillows and a dirty yellow comforter. There was a chair and a tiny table on the

other side of the cage, and on the table paper and pen. Beside the cot there was an

upended wooden box, which also functioned as a table. Books were piled high upon it.

But her attention didn't linger on the books. It was drawn to the cluster of candles

at the far end of the cage. There was a kind of altar there, roughly made; set on a

few pieces of wood raised up on rocks. In the middle of the altar was what Tammy

first thought was a piece of sculpture, representing the face of a beautiful young

woman. When she got closer to it, however, she saw that it was a life-mask. The

mouth carried an oh-so-subtle smile; and there was a slight frown on

the subject's

otherwise perfect brow. Such beauty! Whoever this woman wasóor
had beenóit was easy

to understand why she'd been elected for this place of honor in the
candlelight. It

was the kind of face that made you gape at its perfection. The kind the
camera

loved.

Ah now; the mysteries of this house and place began to seem more
soluble.

Was this beauty the owner of this once-great house; remembered here
by some

obsessive fan? Was this shrine made out of devotion for a woman
who'd walked in

these gardens, once upon a time?

Page 70

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

Tammy took another step towards the altar, and saw that besides the

life-mask there were a number of other, smaller items set there. A
scrap of red

silk, one edge of it hemmed; a cameo brooch, with the same woman's
face carved in

creamy stone; a little wooden box, scarcely larger than a matchbox,
which presumably

held some other treasure; and lying flat beneath all of these a cut-out
paper doll,

about twelve inches tall of a woman dressed in the frilly underwear of

a bygone era.

The paper from which the doll was made had yellowed, the colors of the printing

faded. It was something from the twenties, Tammy guessed. Her knowledge of that era

of cinema was sketchy, but the three faces, one of cardboard, one of plaster, one of

stone, teased her: she knew the woman whose image was thricefold copied here. She'd

seen her flickering black and white picture on some late-night movie channel. She

tried to put a name to the face, but nothing came.

Despairing of the puzzle, she took a step back from the altar, and as she

did so she felt a rush of cool air against the back of her neck. She turned,

completely unprepared for what met her gaze. A man had come into the cage behind

her, entering so silently he was literally a foot from her and she hadn't heard his

approach. There were places in the leafed and barred roof where the sun broke

through, and it fell in bright patches upon him. One of them fell irregularly upon

his face, catching both his eyes, and part of his nose, and the corner of his mouth.

She saw immediately that it wasn't Caputo. It was a much older man, his eyes,

despite the sun that illuminated them, gray, cold and weary, his hair, what was left

of it, grown out to shoulder length and quite white. He was gaunt, but the lack of

flesh on his skull flattered him; he looked, she thought, like a saint in her

grandmother's old Bible, which had been illustrated with pictures by the Old

Masters. This was a man capable of devotion; indeed addicted to it.

He raised his hand and put a homemade cigarette to his lips. Then, with a

kind of old-fashioned style, he flicked open his lighter, lit the cigarette and drew

deeply on it.

"And who might you be?" he said. His voice was the color of his eyes.

"I'm sorry," Tammy said. "I shouldn't be here."

"Please," he said gently, "Let me be the judge of that." He drew on the

cigarette again. The tobacco smelled more pungent than any cigarette she'd ever

inhaled. "I'd still like your name."

"Tammy Lauper. Like I said"

"You're sorry."

"Yes."

"You don't mean to be here."

"No."

"You got lost, I daresay. It's so easy, in the garden."

"I was looking for Todd."

"Ah," the stranger said, glancing away at the roof for a moment. The cigarette smoke was blue as it rose through the slivers of sun. "So you're with Mr.

Pickett's entourage."

"Well no. Not exactly."

"Meaning?"

"I just...well, he knows me..."

"But he doesn't know you're here."

"That's right."

The man's gaze returned to Tammy, and he assessed her, his gaze, though

insistent, oddly polite. "What are you to our Mr. Pickett?" he said. "A mistress of

his, once?"

Tammy couldn't help but smile at this. First, the very thought of it; then,

the word itself. Mistress. Like the flick of his lighter, it was pleasantly old-fashioned. And rather flattering.

"I don't think Todd Pickett would look twice at me," she said, feeling the

need to be honest with this sad, grey man.

"Then that would be his loss," the man replied, the compliment offered so

lightly that even if it wasn't meant it was still beguiling. Out of nowhere she

remembered a phrase her mother had used, to describe Jimmy MacKintosh, the man she'd

eventually divorced Tammy's father to pursue. "He could charm the birds of the

trees, that one." She'd never met a man with that kind of charisma before, in the

flesh. But this man had it. Though their exchange so far had been brief and shallow,

she knew a bird-charmer when she met one.

"May I ask..."

Page 71

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"Ask away."

"...who are you?"

"By all means. One name deserves another. I'm Willem Zeffer."

"I'm pleased to meet you," Tammy said. "Again, I'm sorry." She made a half-hearted glance over her shoulder at the altar. "I shouldn't have come in here."

"You weren't to know. It's easy to get lost in this...jungle. We should have

it all cut back." He smiled thinly. "You just can't get the staff these days."

"That woman," Tammy said. "The one in the mask?"

"In the mask?" Zeffer said, "Oh. I see. Yes. In the mask."

"Who is she?"

He stepped to the side, in order to have a dear view of the altar and what

was upon it. "She was an actress," he explained, "many, many moons ago."

"I thought I recognized her."

"Her name's Katya Lupi."

"Yes?" The name rang a bell, but Tammy still couldn't name any of the movies

this woman had been in.

"Was she very famous?"

"Very. She's up there with Pickford and Swanson and Theda Bara. Or she was."

"She's dead?"

"No, no. Just forgotten. At least that's my impression. I don't get out into

the world any more, but I sense that the name Katya Lupi doesn't mean very much."

"You'd be right."

"Well, she's lucky. She still has her little dominion here in Coldheart Canyon."

"Coldheart?"

"That's what they called the place. She was such a heart-breaker, you see.

She took so many loversóespecially in the early yearsóand when she was done with

them, she just threw them aside."

"Were you one of them?"

Zeffer smiled. "I shared her bed, a little, when I first brought her to America. But she got tired of me very quickly."

"What then?"

"I had other uses, so she kept me around. But a lot of the men who loved her

took her rejection badly. Three committed suicide with bullets. A number of others

with alcohol. Some of them stayed here, where they could be close to her. Including

me. It's foolish really, because there's no way back into her affection."

"Why would you want to be...back, I mean?" Tammy said. "She must be very old

by now."

"Oh time hasn't staled her infinite variety, as the Bard has it. She's still beautiful."

Tammy didn't want to challenge the man, given that he was plainly besotted

with this Lupi woman, but the idol of his heart must be approaching a hundred years

of age by now. It was hard to imagine how any of her beauty remained.

"Well, I guess I should be getting along." Tammy said.

She gently pressed past Zeffer, who put up no resistance, and stepped out of

the cage onto the walkway. It was so quiet she could hear her stomach rumble. Her

Westwood breakfast seemed very remote now; as did the little diner where she'd eaten

it.

Zeffer came after her, out into the open air, and she saw him clearly for

the first time. He had been extremely handsome once, she thought; but his face was a

mess. He looked as though he'd been attacked; punched repeatedly. Raw in places,

pale and powdery in others, he had the appearance of a man who had suffered

intensely, and kept the suffering inside, where it continued to take its toll. She

couldn't make quite so hurried an attempt to abandon him now that she'd seen him

plainly. He seemed to read her equivocation, and suggested that she stay.

Are you really in such a hurry? He looked around him as he spoke; he

seemed to be reading the peculiar stillness in the air.

"Perhaps we could walk together a ways. It isn't always safe up here."

Before she could ask him what he meant by this he turned his back to the

door of the cage and picked up a large stick that was set there. The way he wielded

it suggested he'd used it as a weapon in the past, and had some

expectation of doing

so again now.

"Animals?" she said.

He looked at her with those sorrowful gray eyes of his. "Sometimes animals,

Page 72

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

yes. Sometimes worse."

"I don't understand."

"Perhaps, with respect, it would be better not to try," he advised. The stillness seemed to be deepening around them, the absence of sound becoming heavier,

if that were possible. She didn't need any further encouragement from Zeffer to stay

close to him. Whatever this stillness hid, she didn't want to face it alone. "Just

take it from me that Coldheart Canyon has some less-than-pretty occupants."

Something behind the cages drew Zeffer's attention. Tammy followed the

direction of his gaze. "What were the cages for?" she asked him.

"Katya went through a phase of collecting exotic animals. We had a little

zoo here. A white tiger from India, though he didn't live very long. Later, there

was a rhinoceros. That also perished."

"Wasn't that cruel? Keeping them here, I mean? The cages look so small."

"Yes, of course it was cruel. She's a cruel woman, and I was cruel for doing

her bidding. I have no doubt of that. I was probably unspeakably cruel, in my casual

way. But it takes the experience of living like an animaló" he glanced back at the

cage "óto realize the misery they must have suffered."

Tammy watched him scrutinizing the shrubbery on the far side of the cages.

"What's out there?" she said. "Is it animals tható"

"Come here," Zeffer said, his voice suddenly dropping to an urgent whisper.

"Quickly."

Though she still saw nothing in the shrubbery, she did as she was told.

As she did so there was a blast of icy air down the narrow channel between

the cages, and she saw several formsóhuman forms, but distorted, as though they were

in a wind-tunnel, their mouths blown into a dark circle lined with needle teeth,

their eyes squeezed into dotsócome racing towards her.

"Don't you dare!" she heard Zeffer yell at her side, and saw him raise his

stick. If he landed a blow she didn't see it. The breath was knocked from her as two

of her attackers threw themselves upon her.

One of them put a hand over her face. A spasm of energy passed through her

bone and brain, erupting behind her eyes. It was more than her mind could take. She

saw a white light, like the light that floods a cinema screen when the film breaks.

The cold went away in the same instant: sounds and sights and all the feelings they composed, gone.

The last thing she heard, dying away, was Willem Zeffer's voice yelling:

"Damn you all!"

Then he too was gone.

In the passageway in front of Katya's long-abandoned menagerie, Willem

Zeffer watched as the forces that had broken cover carried Tammy Lauper away into

their own horrid corners of the Canyon, leaving him as he had been left so often in

this godless place—helpless and bereft.

He threw the stick down on the ground, his eyes stinging with tears. Then

the strength ran out of him completely, and he went down on his knees at the

threshold of his hovel, cursing Katya. She wasn't the only one to blame, of course.

He had his own part to play in this tragic melodrama, as he'd admitted

moments

before. But he still wanted Katya damned for what she'd done, as he was damned: for

the death of tigers and rhinoceros, and the murder of innocent women.

PART FOUR

LIVE AFTER FAME

ONE

Three days after Tammy had pursued Marco Caputo up Sunset Boulevard and into

the mysterious arms of Coldheart Canyon was Oscar Night: the Night of Nights, the

Show of Shows, when billions of people across the world turned their eyes on

Tinseltown and Tinseltown did a pirouette and a curtsy and pretended it was a lady

not a five-buck whore.

Todd had known from the start that there was no chance of his attending the

ceremony. Though he could now see that his wounded face was indeed healing properly,

it was plain that he was in no condition to step into the limelight anytime soon. He

had briefly considered hiring one of the great makeup men of the city to disguise

the worst of the discoloration, but Maxine quickly dissuaded him. Such a plan would

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

require them to share their secret with somebody else (this in itself was risky:

makeup personnel were legendary gossips) and there was always the chance that,

however good the cover-up was, the illusion of perfection would be spoiled under the

blaze of so many lights. All it required was one lucky photographer to catch a crack

in the painted mask, and all their hard work would be undone. The rumor-mill would

grind into motion again.

Anyway," she reminded him, "You loathe the Oscars."

This was indeed true. The spectacle of self-congratulation had always

sickened him. The ghastly parade of nervous smiles as everyone traipsed into the

Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, the shrill laughter, the sweaty glances. Then, once

everyone was inside, the circus itself. The lame jokes, the gushing speeches, the

tears, the ego. There was always a minute or two of choreographed mawkishness, when

the Academy carted out some antiquated star and gave them a last chance to flicker.

Occasionally, when the taste level plummeted further than usual, the Academy chose

some poor soul who'd already been stricken by a stroke or was in the early stages of

Alzheimer's. There'd be a selection of clips from the poor victim's great pictures,

then, fumbling and bewildered, he or she would be led out to stand alone on the

stage while the audience rose to applaud them, and you could see in their eyes that

this was some kind of Hell: to have their finest moments thrown up on a screenótheir

faces strong and shiningóand then have the spotlight show the world what age and

disease had done to them.

"You're right," he'd said to Maxine. "I don't want to be there.â

So why, if he truly didn't want to be there, was he sitting at his bedroom

window tonight, staring down the length of the Canyon towards the city, feeling so

damn sorry for himself? Why had he started drinking, and drinking hard, at noon, and

by two-thirtyówhen he knew the first limousines were beginning to roll up to the

Pavilionówas he in the depths of despair?

Why, he asked himself, would he want to keep company with those hollow, sour

people? He'd fought the battle to get to the top of the Hollywood Hill long ago, and

he'd won it. He'd had his face plastered up on ten thousand billboards

across

America, across the world. He'd been called the Handsomest Man in the World, and

believed it. He'd walked into rooms the size of football fields and known that every

eye was turned in his direction, and every heart beat a little faster because he'd

appeared. Just how much more adulation did a man need?

The truth?

Another hundred rooms, filled with people stupefied by worship would not be

enough to satisfy the hunger in him; nor another hundred hundred. He needed his face

plastered on every wall he passed, his movies lauded to the skies, his arms so

filled with Oscars he couldn't hold them all.

It was a sickness in him, but what was he to do? There was no cure for this

emptiness but love; love in boundless amounts; the kind of love God Himself would be

hard-pressed to deliver.

As the cloudless sky darkened towards night he started to pick out the Klieg

lights raking the clouds: not from the Pavilion itself (that lay to the west, and

was not visible from the Canyon), but from the many locations around the city where

his peers, both prize-winners and losers, would in a few hours come to revel.

Members of the press were already assembling at these sacred sitesóMorton's,

Spago's, the Roosevelt Hotelóready to turn their cameras on the slick and the

stylishly unkempt alike. A smile, a witticism, a look of glee from those burdened

with victory. They'd have it all in the morning editions.

Picturing the scene was too much for him. He got up and went down to the

kitchen to fix himself another drink. By now he was on the second cycle of

intoxication; having drunk himself past the point of nausea by mid-afternoon, he was

moving inexorably towards a deep luxurious drunkenness; the kind that flirted with

oblivion. He'd suffer for it for whatever part of tomorrow he saw of course, and

probably the day after that. He was no longer young enough or resilient enough to

shrug off the effects of a binge like this. But right now he didn't give a rat's

ass. He simply wanted to be insulated from the pain he was feeling.

As he opened the immense fridge to get himself ice, he heard, or thought he

heard, somebody, a woman, say his name.

He stopped digging for the ice and looked around. The kitchen was

empty. He

left the fridge open and went back to the door. The turret was also deserted, and

the dining room dark, the empty table and chairs silhouetted against the window. He

Page 74

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

walked on through it into the living room, calling for Marco. He flipped on the

light. The fifty-lamp chandelier blazed, illuminating an empty room. There were

several boxes of his belongings sitting there, still unopened. Moved from Bel Air

but still unpacked. But that was all.

He was about to go back to the kitchen, assuming the voice he'd heard

alcohol-induced, when he heard his name called a second time. He looked back into

the dining room. Was he going crazy? "Marco?" he yelled.

There was a long empty moment. Somewhere in the darkness of the Canyon a

solitary coyote was yelping. Then came the sound of a door opening, and he heard

Marco's familiar voice: "Yes, boss?"

"I heard somebody calling."

"In the house?"

"Yeah. I thought so. A woman's voice."

Marco appeared on the stairs now, looking down at his employer with an

expression of concern. "You okay?"

"Yeah. I just got unnerved, is all."

"You want me to go check around?"

"Yeah, I guess so. I don't even know where it was coming from. But I heard

somebody. I swear."

Marco, who'd emerged from his bedroom in his boxers, headed back upstairs to

get dressed. Todd went back to the kitchen, feeling a little stupid. There wasn't

going to be anybody here, inside the house or out. Every stalker, every voyeur,

every obsessive was canvassing the crowds around the Pavilion, looking for a way to

slide past the security guards, under the velvet rope, and into the company of their

idols. They weren't wasting their time stumbling around in the darkness hoping for a

glance of Todd Pickett, all fucked up. Nobody even knew he was here, for Christ's

sake. Worse; nobody cared.

As he returned to the business of making his drink, he heard Marco coming

down back the stairs, and was half tempted to tell him to forget it. But he decided

against it. No harm in letting one of them feel useful tonight. He dropped a handful

of ice-cubes into his glass, and filled it up with Scotch. Took a mouthful. Topped

it up. Took another mouthful. And the voice came again.

If there had been some doubt in his head as to whether he'd actually heard

the call or simply imagined it, there was now none. Somebody was here in the house,

calling to him.

It seemed to be coming from the other side of the hallway. He set his drink

down on the counter and quietly crossed the kitchen. The turret was deserted. There

was nobody on the stairs either above or below.

He took the short passageway down to what Marco had dubbed the Casino, an

immense wood-paneled room, lit by a number of low-slung lights, which indeed looked

as though it had been designed to house a roulette wheel and half a dozen poker

tables. Judging by the distance of the voice it seemed the likeliest place for

whoever had spoken to be lurking. As he walked down the passageway it briefly

occurred to him that to make this investigation without Marco at his side was

foolishness. But the drink made him bold. Besides, it was only a

woman he'd heard.

He could deal with a woman.

The door of the Casino stood open. He peered in. The windows were undraped;

a few soft panels of gray light slid through them, illuminating the enormity of the

place. He could see no sign of an intruder. But some instinct instructed him not to

believe the evidence of his eyes. He wasn't alone here. The skin of his palms

pricked. So, curiously, did the flesh beneath his bandages, as though it were

especially susceptible in its newborn state.

"Who's there?" he said, his voice less confident than he'd intended.

At the far end of the room one of the pools of light fluttered. Something

passed through it, raising the dust.

"Who's there?" he said again, his hand straying to the light switch.

He resisted the temptation to turn it on, however. Instead he waited, and

watched. Whoever this trespasser was she was too far from him to do any harm.

"You shouldn't be in here," he said gently. "You do know that, don't you?"

Again, that subtle motion on the other end of the room. But he still

couldn't make out a figure; the darkness beyond the pool of light was too

impenetrable.

"Why don't you step out where I can see you?" he said suggested.

This time he got an answer.

Page 75

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"I will..." she told him. "In a minute."

"Who are you?"

"My name's Katya."

"How did you get in here?"

"Through the door, like everybody else," she said. Her tone was one of gentle amusement. It would have annoyed Todd if there hadn't also been a certain

sweetness there. He was curious to see what she looked like. But the more he pressed

her, he thought, the more she'd resist. So he kept the conversation off the subject,

and casually wandered across the immaculately laid and polished floor as he talked.

"It must have been hard to find me," he said.

"Not at all," she said. "I heard you were coming from Jerry."

"You know Jerry?"

"Oh, yes. We go way back. He used to come up here when he was a child. You

made a good choice with him, Todd. He keeps secrets."

"Really? I always thought he was a bit of a gossip."

"It depends if it's important or not. He never mentioned me to you, did he?"

"No."

"You see. Oh yes, and he's dying. I suppose he didn't mention that either."

"No he didn't."

"Well he is. He has cancer. Inoperable."

"He never said a thing," Todd said, thinking not only of Jerry but of sick,

silent Dempsey.

"Well why would he? To you of all people. He idolizes you."

Her familiarity with Jerry, and her knowledge of his sickness, only added to

the puzzle of her presence.

"Did he send you up here?" Todd said.

"No, silly," the woman replied. "He sent you. I've been here all the time."

"You have? Where?"

"Oh, I mostly stay in the guest-house."

She spoke so confidently, he almost believed her. But then surely if she

were occupying the guest-house, Brahms would have warned Maxine? He knew how

important Todd's security was. Why would he let Maxine see the property, and not

mention the fact that there was somebody else living in the Canyon?

He was about halfway across the room now, and he could now see his visitor's

outline in the darkness. Her voice had not misled him. She was a young woman;

elegantly dressed in a long, silver gown, highlighted with sinuous designs in gold

thread. It shimmered, as though it possessed a subtle life of its own.

"How long have you been staying here?" he said to her.

"A lot longer than you," she replied.

"Really?"

"Well, of course. When I first met Jerry, I'd been here...twenty, twenty-five years."

This was an absurd invention of course. Even without seeing her clearly, it

was obvious she was less than thirty; probably considerably less.

"But you said Jerry was a boy when you met him?" Todd said, thinking he'd

quickly catch the woman in her lie.

"He was."

"So you can't have known him..."

"I know it doesn't seem very likely. But things are different here in the Canyon. You'll see. If you stay, that is. And I hope you will."

"You mean buy the house?"

"No. I mean stay."

"Why would I do that?" he said.

There was a moment's pause, then, finally, she stepped into the light.

"Because I want you to," she replied.

It was a moment from a movie; timed to perfection. The pause, the move, the

line.

And the face, that was from a movie too, in its luxury, in its perfection.

Her eyes were large and luminous, green flecked with lilac. Their brightness was

enhanced by the darkness of her eyeshadow, and the thickness of her lashes. Neither

her nose nor her mouth were delicate; her lips were full, her chin robust, her

cheekbones high; almost Slavic. Her hair was black, and fell straight down, framing

her face. She wore plenty of jewelry, and it was all exquisite. One necklace lay

Page 76

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

tightly in the valley of her throat, anotherómuch, much looserófell between her

breasts. Her earrings were gold; her braceletsóseveral on each wristóall elaborately

wrought. Yet she carried all this effortlessly, as though she'd been wearing a

queen's ransom in jewelry all her life.

"I'm sure you could find plenty of company besides me," Todd replied.

"I'm sure I could," she replied. "But I don't want plenty of company. I want

you."

Todd was totally bewildered now. No part of this puzzle fitted with any

other. The woman looked so poised, so exquisite, but she spoke nonsense. She didn't

know him. She hadn't chosen him. He'd come up here of his own free will, to hide

himself away. Yet she seemed to insinuate that he was here at her behest, and that

somehow she intended to make him stay. It was all pure invention.

Still she didn't look crazy; anything but. She looked, in fact, as though

she'd just stepped out of her limo at the Pavilion and was about to walk down the

red carpet to a roar of adulation from the crowd. He wouldn't have minded being

beside her, either, if she had been taking that walk. They would have made quite a

couple.

"You haven't looked around the house very much," she said.

"How do you know?"

"Oh...I have eyes everywhere," she teased. "If you'd been in some of the

rooms in this house, I'd know about it, believe me."

"I don't find any of this very comforting," he said. "I don't like people spying on me."

"I wasn't spying," she said, her tone going from pleasing to fierce in a heartbeat.

"Well what would you call it?"

"I'd call it being a good hostess. Making sure your guest is comfortable."

"I don't understand."

"No," she said, more softly now, "you don't. But you will. When we've had a

chance to spend some time with one another you'll see what's really going on here."

"And what's that?"

She half-turned from him, as though she might leave, which was the last

thing he wanted her to do. "You know maybe we'd be better leaving this for another

night," she said.

"No," he said hurriedly. She halted, but didn't turn back.

"I'm sorry," he said. They were rare words from his mouth. "Truly?" she

said. Still she didn't turn. He found himself longing to feel her gaze on him, as

thoughóabsurd as this wasóshe might go some way to filling the void in him.

"Please," he said. "I'm truly sorry."

"All right," she said, apparently placated. She looked back at him.
"You're

forgiven. For now."

"So tell me what I've missed. In the house."

"Oh, all that can wait."

"At least give me a clue."

"Have you been downstairs? I mean all the way down to the bottom?"

"No."

"Then don't," she said, lowering her head and looking up at him with a veiled gaze. "I'll take you there myself."

"Take me now," he said, thinking it would be a good opportunity to find out

how real all her claims were. "No, not tonight."

"Why not?"

"It's Oscar Night."

"So?"

"So it's got you all stirred up. Look at you. You think you can drink the pain away? It doesn't work. Everyone here's tried that at some point or other."

"Everyone?"

"In the Canyon. There are a lot of people here who are feeling exactly like

you tonight."

"And how's that?"

"Oh, just wishing they'd had a few prizes for their efforts."

"Well they don't give Oscars to actors like me."

"Why not?"

"I guess they don't think I'm very good."

Page 77

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

And what do you think?"

He mused on this for a moment. Then he said: "Most of the time I'm just

being me, I guess."

"That's a performance," Katya said. "People think it's easy. But it's not.

Being yourself...that's hard."

It was strange to hear it put that way, but she was right. It wasn't easy,

playing yourself. If you let your attention drop for a moment, there was nothing

there for the camera to look at. Nothing behind the eyes. He'd seen it, in his own

performances and in those of others: moments when the concentration lapsed for a few

seconds and the unforgiving lens revealed a vast vapidty.

"I know how it hurts," she said, "not to be appreciated."

"I get a lot of other stuff, you know."

"The other stuff being money."

"Yes. And celebrity."

And half the time you think: it doesn't matter, anyway. They're all ignoramuses at the Academy, voting for their friends. What do you want from them?

But you're not really convinced. In your heart you want their worthless little

statues. You want them to tell you they know how much you work to be perfect."

He was astonished at this. She had articulated what he'd felt on a decade of

Oscar Nights; an absurd mixture of contempt and envy. It was as though she was

reading his mind. "How did you figure all that out?"

"Because I've felt the same things. You want them to love you, but you hate

yourself for wanting it. Their love isn't worth anything, and you know it."

"But you still want it."

"You still want it."

"Damn."

"Meaning yes?"

"Yes. That's it. You got me."

It felt good, for once, to be understood. Not the usual nodding,

what-ever-you-say-Mr.-Pickett bullshit, but some genuine comprehension of the mess

inside him. Which made the mystery of its source all the stranger. One minute she

was telling him lies (how could she possibly have known Brahms as a child?) the next

she was seeing into his soul. "If you really do own this house," he said, "why don't

you live in it?"

"Because there are too many memories here," she said simply. "Good and bad.

I walk in here and," she smiled, though the smile was thin, "it's filled with

ghosts."

"So why not move away?"

"Out of Coldheart Canyon? I can't."

"Are you going to tell me why?"

"Another time. This is a bad time to tell that story." She passed her delicate hand over her face, and for a moment, as the veil of her fingers covered

her features, he saw her retreat from her beauty, as though for a moment the

performance of selfhood was too much for her. "You ask me a question," he suggested.

Her hand dropped away. The light shone out of her face again. "You swear

you'll answer me truthfully if I do?"

"Sure."

"Swear."

"I said so."

"Does it hurt behind the bandages?"

"Oh."

"You said you'd answer me."

"I know. And I will. It's uncomfortable, I'll tell you that. But it doesn't really hurt anymore. Not like it used to. I just wish I'd never messed with this. I

mean, why couldn't I be happy the way I was?"

"Because nobody is. We're always looking for something we haven't got. If we

weren't, we wouldn't be human."

"Is that why you came spying on me?" he said, matching her mischief with

some of his own. "Looking for something you haven't got?"

"I'm sorry. It was rude of me: watching you, I mean. Spying. You've as much

right to your privacy as I have to mine. And it's hard to protect yourself

sometimes. You don't know who's a friend and who's not. That can make you crazy."

Her eyes flashed, and the playfulness was back. "Then again, sometimes it's good to

be crazy."

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"Yes?"

"Oh sure. Sometimes it's the only thing keeps you sane."

"You're obviously talking from experience."

"Of getting crazy once in a while? Sure. I'm talking from intimate experience."

"Care to give me an example?"

"You don't want to know. Really you don't. Some of the things I've done in

this very room..."

"Tell me."

"I wouldn't know where to begin."

Her gaze flitted off around the room, as though she was looking for some cue

for her memories. If it was an act, it was a very good one. In fact this whole

performance was looking better and better.

Finally, she said: "We used to play poker here. Sometimes roulette."

"Marco and I figured that out."

"Sometimes," she said, her gaze returning to him, "I was the prize."

"You?"

"Me."

"I don't think I understand."

"You understand perfectly well."

"You'd give yourself to the winner?"

"See? You understood. I didn't do it every night. I'm not that much of a slut." She was smiling as she spoke, lapping up his disbelief. She began to walk

towards him, slowly, matching her approach to the rhythm of her words. "But on the

nights when you need to be crazyó"

"What did you give them? A kiss!"

"Pah! A kiss! As if I'd be satisfied with so little. No! Down on the floor in front of the losers, that's what I'd give them. Like dogs, if we felt like it."

The way she stared at the ground as she spoke, it was clear she was remembering something very specific. The subtlest of motions went through her, as

though her body was recalling the sensation of pressing back against a man; to take

him, all of him, inside her.

"Supposing somebody won that you didn't like?"

"There was no such man. Not here, in my house. They were all gods. Beautiful

men, every single one. Some of them were crude at first. But I taught them." She was

watching Todd closely as she spoke, measuring his response. "You like hearing this?"

He nodded. It wasn't quite the way he'd expected this conversation to

go,

but yes, he liked her confessions. He was glad his pants were baggy, now that she

was so close to him, or she'd have seen for herself how much he liked them.

"So let me be sure I got this right. The winner would fuck you, right here

on the groundó"

"Not on the bare boards. There used to be carpets. Beautiful Persian

carpets. And there were silk cushions, red ones, which I kept in a heap over there.

I like to make love amongst cushions. It's like being held in somebody's hand, isn't

it?" She opened her cupped hand in front to demonstrate the comfort of it. "In God's

hand."

She lifted the bed of her palm in front of his eyes, and then, without

warning, she reached out and touched his face. He felt nothing through the bandages,

but he had the illusion that her hand was like a balm upon his cheek, cooling his

raw flesh.

"Does that hurt?"

"No."

"Do you want me to go on telling you?"

"Yes, please."

"You want to hear what I did..."

"...on the cushions. Yes. But first, I want to know"

"Who?"

"No, not who. Why?"

"Why? Lord in Heaven, why would I fuck? Because I loved it! It gave me

pleasure." She leaned closer to him, still stroking his cheek. He could smell her

throat on the breath she exhaled. The air, for all its invisibility, was somehow

enriched by its transport into her and out again. He envied the men who'd taken

similar liberties. In and out; in and out. Wonderful.

"I love to have a man's weight bearing down on me," she went on. "To be

Page 79

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

pinned, like a butterfly. Open. And then, when he thinks he's got you completely

under his thumb, roll him over and ride him." She laughed. "I wish I could see the

expression on your face."

"It's not pretty under there." He paused, a chilling thought on his lips.

"The answer's no," she said.

"The answer to what?"

"Have I spied on you while your bandages were being changed? No I haven't."

"Good." He took a deep breath, wanting to direct the conversation away from

talk of what was behind his mask. "Go back to the game," he said.

"Where was I?"

"Riding the lucky sonofabitch."

"Horses. Dogs. Monkeys. Men make good animals. Women too sometimes."

"Women got to play?"

"Not in here. I'm very old-fashioned about things like that. In Romania a

woman never played cards."

"Romania. That's where you're from?"

"Yes. A little village called Ravbac, where I don't think any woman had ever

had pleasure with a man."

"Is that why you left?"

"One of many reasons. I ran away when I was barely twelve. Came to this

country when I was fifteen. Made my first picture a year later."

"What was it called?"

"I don't want to talk about it. It's forgotten."

"So finish telling meó"

"óabout riding the men. What else is there to say? It was the best

game in

the world. Especially for an exhibitionist, like myself. You too."

"What about me?"

"You've done it in front of people. Surely. Don't tell me you haven't. I

won't believe you."

What the hell? This woman had him all figured out. Pinned. Like a butterfly.

There didn't seem to be much purpose in denying it.

"Yes, I've had a few public moments at private parties."

"Are you good?"

"It depends on the girl."

She smiled. "I think you'd be wonderful, with the right audience," she said.

Her hand dropped from his cheek, and she started to walk back across the

room, weaving between imaginary obstacles as she picked up her erotic tale.

"Some nights, I would simply walk naked amongst the tables while the men

played. They weren't allowed to look at me. If they looked, I would thrash them. And

I mean thrash. I had a whip for that. I still have it. The Teroarea. The Terror.

So...that was one of the rules. No looking at the prize, no matter what it did to

tempt them." She laughed. "You can imagine, I had a hundred ways. Once I had a

little bell, hooked through the hood of my clitoris. Tinkling as I walked. Somebody

looked, I remember. And oh they suffered."

She was at the mantelpiece now, reaching up and under the fireplace and took

a long, silver-handled switch from its hiding place. She tested it on the air, and

it whined like a vengeful mosquito. "This is the Teroarea. I had it

made by a man in

Paris, who specialized in such things. My name is chased into the handle." She

passed her thumb over the letters: "Katya Lupescu, it says. Actually it says more.

It says: 'This is her instrument, to make fools suffer.' I regret having that

written there, really."

"Why?"

"Because a man who takes pleasure in being given pain is not a fool. He's

simply following his instincts. Where's the foolishness in that?"

"You're big on pleasure," Todd said.

She didn't seem to understand what he meant; she cocked her head, puzzled.

"You talk about it a lot."

"Twice I've mentioned it," she said. "But it's been in my mind a little more

than that."

"Why?"

"Don't be coy," she said, a little sternly. "Or I'll beat you."

"I might not like that."

"Oh, you would."

"Really..." he said, with just a touch of anxiety in his voice. He could not

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

imagine having that thing, her Terror, give him pleasure, however expertly it was

wielded.

"It can be gentle, if I want it to be."

"That?" he said. "Gentle?"

"Oh yes." She made a scooping motion with her free hand. If I have a man's

sex in my palm, here." He got an instant, and uncannily sharp picture of what she

had in mind. Her victim on all fours, and that scooping motion of hers; the taking

up of his cock and balls, ready for her. Completely vulnerable; completely

humiliated. He'd never let a woman do anything like that to him, however much she

promised it was to give him pleasure.

"I can see you're not convinced," she said, "even when I don't have your

face to look at. So you'll just have to take it on trust. I could touch men with

this and they'd shoot like sixteen-year-olds. Even Valentino."

"Valentino?"

"And he was queer."

"Rudolph Valentino?"

"Yes. You didn't know he was that way?"

"No, it's just...he's been dead a long time."

"Yes, it was sad to lose him so quickly," she said.

She obviously had no difficulty agreeing with him about how long the Great

Lover had been deceased, even though it made nonsense of her story.

"We had a great party for him, out on the lawn, two weeks after he'd been

taken from us." She turned away from him and laid the switch back on the

mantelpiece. "I know you don't believe a word of what I've told you. You've done the

mathematics, and none of it's remotely possible." She leaned on the mantelpiece, her

chin on the heel of her hand. "What have you decided? That I'm some kind of

trespasser? A little sexually deranged but essentially harmless?"

"I suppose something like that."

"Hmm." She mused on this for a moment. Then she said: "You'll change your

mind, eventually. But there's no hurry. I've waited a long time for this."

"This?"

"You. Us."

She left the thought there to puzzle him a moment, then she turned, the

dusting of melancholy that had crept into her voice over the course of the last few

exchanges brushed away. She was bright again; gleaming with harmless trouble-making.

"Have you ever done it with a man?"

"Oh, Jesus."

"So you have!"

He was caught. There was no use denying it.

"Only...twice. Or three times."

"You can't remember."

"Okay, three times."

"Was it good?"

"I'll never do it again, so I guess that's your answer."

"Why are you so sure?"

"There's some things you can be that sure of," he said. Then, a little less

confidently, "Aren't there?"

"Even men who aren't queer imagine other men sometimes. Yes?"

"Well..."

"Perhaps you're the exception to the rule. Perhaps you're the one the Canyon

isn't going to touch." She started to walk back towards him. "But don't be too

certain. It takes the pleasure out of things. Maybe you should let a woman take

charge for a while."

"Are we talking about sex?"

"Valentino swore he only liked men, but as soon as I took charge..."

"Don't tell me. He was like a naughty schoolboy."

"No. Like a baby." Her hand went to her breast, and she squeezed it, catching the nipple in the groove between her thumb and forefinger, as though to

proffer it for Todd to suckle.

He knew it wasn't smart to show too much emotion to the woman. If there was

some genuine streak of derangement in her, it would only empower her more. But he

couldn't help himself. He took half a step backwards, aware that the trenches of his

mouth were suddenly running with spit at the thought of her nipple in his mouth.

"You shouldn't let your mind get between you and what your body wants," she

Page 81

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

said. She took her hand from her breast. The nipple stood hard beneath the light

fabric.

"I know what my body wants."

"Really?" she said, sounding genuinely surprised at the claim. "You know

what it wants deep down? All the way down to the very darkest place?"

He didn't reply.

She reached out and took gentle hold of his hand. Her fingers were cold and

dry; his were clammy.

"What are you afraid of?" she said. "Not me, surely."

"I'm not afraid," he said.

"Then come to me," she told him, softly. "I'll find out what you want."
He

let her draw him closer to her; let her hands move up over his chest towards his

face.

"You're a big man," she murmured.

Her fingers were at his neck now. Whatever she was promising about

discovering his desires, he knew what she wanted; she wanted to see his face. And

though there was a part of his mind that resisted the idea, there was a greater part

that wanted her to see him, for better or worse. He let her hands go up to his

jawline; let her fingers rest on the adhesive tape that held the mask of gauze

against his wound.

"May I...?" she asked him.

"Is this what you came here to do?"

She made a small, totally ambiguous smile. Then she pulled at the tape. It

came away with a gentle tug. He felt the gauze loosen. He stared down into her face,

wondering in this long moment before it was done and beyond saving if she would

reject him when she saw the scars and the swelling. A scene from that same silent

horror movie he'd seen in his mind's eye many times since Burrows had done his

brutal work, flickered in his head: Katya as the appalled heroine, reeling away in

disgust at what her curiosity had uncovered. He the monster, enraged at her

revulsion and murderous in his self-contempt.

It was too late to stop it now. She was pulling at the gauze, coaxing it away from the hurts it concealed.

He felt the cool air upon his wounds, and cooler still, her scrutiny. The gauze dropped to the floor between them. He stood there before her, more naked than

he'd ever been in his life—even in nightmares of nakedness, more naked—awaiting

judgment.

She wasn't horrified. She wasn't screaming, wasn't flinching. She simply

looked at him, without any interpretable expression on her face.

"Well?" he said.

"He made a mess of you, no doubt about that. But it's healing. And if my

opinion is worth anything to you, I'd say you're going to be fine.
Better than

fine."

She took a moment to assess him further. To trace the line of his jaw, the

curve of his temple.

"But it's never going to be perfect," she said.

His stomach lurched. Here was the heart of it: the bitter part nobody had

wanted to admit to him; not even himself. He was spoiled. Perhaps just a little, but

a little was all it would take to shake him from his high perch. His precious face,

his golden face, the beauty that had made him the idol of millions, had been

irreparably damaged.

"I know," Katya said, "you're thinking your life won't be worth living.
"But

that's just not true."

"How the hell do you know?" he said, smarting from the truth, angered by her

honesty.

"Because I knew all the great stars, in the silent days. And believe me, the

smart onesówhen they weren't making the money any longerójust

shrugged and said

okay, I've had my time."

"What did they do then?"

"Listen to yourself! There's life after fame. Sure it'll take some getting used to, but people have perfectly good livesó"

"I don't want a perfectly good life. I want the life I had."

"Well you can't have it," she said, very simply.

It was a long time since somebody had told Todd Pickett that he couldn't

have something, and he didn't like it. He took hold of her wrists and pulled her

Page 82

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

hands away from his face. A quick fury had risen in him. He wanted to strike at her,

knock her stupid words out of her mouth.

"You know, you are crazy," he said.

"Didn't I tell you?" she said, making no attempt to touch him again. "Some

nights I'm so crazy I'm ready to hang myself. But I don't. You know why? I made this

hell for myself, so it's up to me to live in it, isn't it?"

He didn't respond to her; he was still in a filthy rage about what she'd said.

"Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"I think I've had it with your advice for the night," he said, "so why don't

you just go back wherever you came from" In mid-sentence he heard Marco calling.

"Boss? Are you okay? Where the hell are you?"

He looked towards the door, half expecting to see Marco already standing

there. He wasn't. Todd then looked back at Katya, or whoever the hell she was. The

woman was retreating from him, shaking her head as if to say: don't tell.

"It's okay!" he yelled to Marco.

"Where are you?"

"I'm fine. Go make me a drink. I'll meet you in the kitchen!"

Katya had already retreated to the far end of the room, where the shadows

from which she had originally emerged were enclosing her.

"Wait!" Todd said, his fury not yet completely abated.

He wanted to make sure the woman didn't leave thinking she would be allowed

to come back, come stalking him while he slept, damn her. But she had turned her

back on him now, ignoring his instruction. So he went after her.

A door opened in the darkness ahead of him, and he felt a wave of night-air,

cool and fragrant, come in against his face. He hadn't known that there was a door

to the outside of the house at the far end of the Casino, but she was out through it

in a heartbeat (he saw her silhouette as she flitted away along a starlit path), and

by the time he reached the door she was gone, leaving the shrubs she'd brushed as

she ran shaking.

He stepped over the threshold, and looked around, attempting to orient

himself. The path Katya had taken led up the hill, winding as it went. Back to the

guest-house, no doubt. That was where the crazy-lady was in residence. She'd made

herself a nice little nest in the guest-house. Well, that was easily fixed. He'd

just send Marco up there tomorrow to evict her.

"Boss?"

He walked back into the Casino and stared down at the expanse of floor where

she'd had him picturing her making love. He'd believed her, too; a little. At least

his dick had.

Marco was at the other end of the room.

"What the hell's going on?" he said.

Todd was about to tell him there and then about to send him up the

hill to

oust the trespasseróbut Marco was bending down to gingerly pick something up from

the ground. It was Todd's discarded bandages.

"You took 'em off," he said.

"Yeah."

The rage he'd felt started to seep out of him now, as he remembered the

tender way she'd looked at him. Not judging him, simply looking.

"What happened, Boss?"

"I found another door," he said rather lamely.

"Was there somebody here?" Marco said.

"I don't know," he said. "Maybe. I was just wandering around, and I came

down here..."

"The door was open?"

"No, no," Todd said. He closed the door with a solid slam. "I just tried it

and it was unlocked."

"It needs a new lock then," Marco said, his tone uncertain, as though he was

suspicious of what he was being told, but playing along.

"Yes, it needs a new lock."

"Okay."

They stood for a moment at opposite ends of the room, in silence.

"Are you all right?" Marco said after a pause.

"Yeah. I'm fine."

"You know pills 'n' liquor'll be the death of you."

Page 83

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"I'm hopin'," Todd replied, his joviality as forced as Marco's.

"Okay. If you say you're okay, you're okay."

"I'm okay."

Marco proffered the bandages. "What do you want me to do with these?"

"What do you think?" Todd said, getting back into the normal rhythm of their

exchanges now. The door was closed. The woman and the path and the nodding shrubs

were out of sight. Whatever she'd said, he could forget, at least for tonight. "Burn

them. Where's that drink? I'm going to celebrate."

"What are you celebrating?"

"Me losing those damn bandages. I looked like God knows what."

"Burrows might want you to keep 'em on."

"Fuck Burrows. If I want to take the bandages off, it's my choice."

"It's your face."

"Yeah," Todd said, staring again at the ground where the crazy woman

had

claimed she'd laid her body, imagining her there. "It's my face."

TWO

Maxine came up to the house the following afternoon to tell Todd about the

Oscar festivities, reporting it allóthe ceremony itself, then the partiesówith a

fine disregard for his tenderness. Several times he almost stopped her and told her

he didn't want to hear any more, but the dregs of curiosity silenced him. He still

wanted to know who'd won and who'd lost.

There'd been the usual upsets, of course, the usual grateful tears from the

usual surprised ingenues, all but swooning away with gratitude. This year, there'd

even been fisticuffs: an argument had developed in the parking lot at Spago's

between Quincy Martinaro, a young, fast-talking filmmaker who'd made two movies,

been lionized, and turned into a legendary ego all in the space of fifteen months,

and Vincent Dinny, a vicious writer for Vanity Fair who'd recently profiled

Martinaro most unflatteringly. Not that Dinny was a paragon himself. He was a

waspish, embittered man in his late sixties, whoóhaving failed in his ascent of the

Hollywood aristocracy had turned to writing about the town's underbelly. Nobody

could have given a toss for his pieces had they not carried a certain sting of

truth. The piece on Martinaro, for instance, had mentioned a certain taste for

heroin; which was indeed the man's vice of choice.

"So who won?" Todd wanted to know.

"Quincy broke two fingers when he fell against his car, and Dinny got a

bloody nose. So I don't know who won. It's all so ridiculous. Acting like children."

"Did you actually see them fighting?"

"No, but I saw Dinny afterwards. Blood all over his shirt." There was a pause. "I think he knows something."

"What?"

"He was quite civilized about it. You know how he is. Shriveled up little

prick. He just said to me: I hear Todd's had some medical problems, and now you've

got him under lock and key. And I just looked at him. Said nothing. But he knows."

"This is so fucked."

"I don't know how we deal with it, frankly. Sooner or later, he's going to

suggest a piece to Vanity Fair, and they're going to jump on it."

"So fucked," Todd said, more quietly. "What the hell did I do to deserve

this?"

Maxine let the question go. Then she said. "Oh, by the way, do you remember

Tammy Lauper?"

"No."

"She runs the Fan Club."

"Oh yeah."

"Fat."

"Is she fat?"

"She's practically obese."

"Did she come to the office?"

"No; I got a call from the police in Sacramento, asking if we'd seen her.

She's gone missing."

"And they think I might have absconded with her?"

"I don't know what they think. The point is, you haven't seen her up here?"

"Nope."

Page 84

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"Maybe over in Bel Air?"

"I haven't been over in Bel Air. Ask Marco."

"Yeah, well I said I'd ask you and I asked."

Todd went to the living-room window, and gazed out at the Bird of Paradise

trees that grew close to the house. They hadn't been trimmed in many years; and were

top-heavy with flowers and rotted foliage, their immensity blocking his view of the

opposite hill. But it didn't take much

of an effort of imagination to bring the Canyon into his mind's eye. The palm-trees

that lined the opposite ridge; the pathways and the secret groves; the empty

swimming pool, the empty koi pond; the statues, standing in the long grass. He was

suddenly seized by an overwhelming desire to be out there in the warm sunshine, away

from Maxine and her brittle gossip.

"I gotta go," he said to Maxine.

"Go where?"

"I just gotta go," he said, heading for the door.

"Wait," Maxine said. "We haven't finished business."

"Can't it wait?"

"No, I'm afraid this part can't."

Todd made an impatient sigh, and turned back to her. "What is it?"

"I've been doing some thinking over the last few days. About our working

relationship."

"What about it?"

"Well, to put it bluntly, I think it's time we parted company."

Todd didn't say anything. He just looked at Maxine with an expression of

utter incomprehension on his face, as though she'd just spoken to him in a foreign

language. Then, after perhaps ten seconds, he returned his gaze to the Birds of

Paradise.

"You don't know how wearying it gets," Maxine went on. "Waking up thinking

about whether everything's okay with Todd, and going to sleep thinking the same damn

thing. Not having a minute in a day when I'm not worrying about you. I just can't do

it anymore. It's simple as that. It's making me ill. I've got high blood pressure,

high cholesterol"

"I've made you a lot of money over the years," Todd broke in to observe.

And I've taken care of you. It's been a very successful partnership. You

made me rich. I made you famous."

"You didn't make me famous."

"Well, if I didn't I'd like to know who the hell did."

"Me," Todd replied, raising the volume of his voice just a fraction. "It's me people came to see. It's me they loved. I made myself famous."

"Don't kid yourself," Maxine said, her voice a stone.

There was a long silence. The wind brushed the leaves of the Bird of Paradise trees together, like the blades of plastic swords being brushed together.

"Wait," Todd said. "I know what this is about. You've got a new boy. That's

it, isn't it? You're fucking some kid, andó"

"I'm not fucking anybody, Todd."

"You fucked me."

"Twice. A long time ago. I wouldn't do it today."

"Well just for the record neither would I."

Maxine looked at him coldly. "That's it. I've said what I needed to say."

She went to the door. Todd called after her. "Why do it to me now? Why wait

till I'm so fucking tired I can hardly think straight!" His voice continued to get

louder, creeping up word on word, syllable on syllable. "And then screw me up like

this?"

"Don't worry, I'll find somebody else to look after you. I'll train them.

You'll be taken good care of. It's not like I'm walking out on you."

"Yes you are."

He turned to look at her, finally. The blood had rushed to the surface of

his half-mended face. It was grotesquely red.

"You think I'm finished, so you're leaving me to be crucified by every piece

of shit journalist in the fucking country."

Maxine ignored the outburst, and picked up what she was saying. "I'll find

somebody to take over, who'll protect you better than I can. Because I'm just as

tired as you are, Todd. Then I'm going to have one last party down at the

Page 85

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

beach-house, and get the hell out of this city before it kills me."

"Well I'm not going to let you go."

"Oh, now don't start threateningó"

"I'm not starting anything. I'm just reminding you. We've got a contract.

I'm not going to allow you to make a fortune out of me and then just walk away when

things get difficult. You owe me."

"I what?"

"Whatever's on the contract. Another two years."

"I can't do it. I won't do it."

"Then I'll sue your ass, for every fucking cent you earned off me."

"You can try."

"And I'll win."

"Like I said, you can try. If you want all our dirty washing dragged out for

everyone to see, then do it. I guarantee you'll come out looking worse than I will.

I've covered for you so many times, Todd."

"And you signed a confidentiality agreement. If you break it, I'll sue you

for breaking that, too."

"Who cares? Nobody gives a rat's ass about me. I'm just a professional parasite. You're the movie star. You're the all-American boy. The one with the

reputation to lose." She paused. Then murmured, almost ruminatively: "The tales I

could tell..."

"I can tell just as many."

"There's nothing anyone can call me that I haven't been called a hundred

times. I know everyone says I'm a cunt. That's what they say right? 'How can you

work with that fucking cunt?' If I have to hear it in a courtroom one more time, I

can take that, as long as when it's all over I don't have to hear your whining and

complaining any more."

"Okay," Todd said. "If that's the way you want to play it."

Maxine headed for the door. "For your information," she said, "I could go

down to LAX right now, and I could fill a limo with kids who have ten times your

talent. They're all coming here, looking to be the next Tom Cruise, the next

Leonardo DiCaprio, the next Todd Pickett. Pretty boys with tight asses and nice abs

who'll end up, most of'em, selling their tight asses on Santa Monica Boulevard. The

lucky ones'll end up waiters.†

"If I wanted to, I could make any one of them a moviestar. Maybe not a star

like you. But then again maybe bigger. Right face, right time, right movie. Some of

it's luck, some of it's salesmanship. The point is, I sold you, Todd. I told people

you were going to be huge, and I said it so often that it became the truth. And you

were so sweet back then. So...natural. You were the boy next door, and yesófor your

informationóI was a little in love with you, like everyone else. But it didn't last

long. You changed. I changed. We both got rich. We both got greedy." She put her

hand to her mouth, and gently passed her fingers over her lips. "But

you know what,

Todd? Neither of us was ever happy. Am I right? You were never happy, even when you

had everything you'd every dreamed of wanting."

"What's your point?"

"I don't know what the point is," she said softly. "I guess that's the problem in a nutshell, isn't it? I don't know what the point is." She stared into

middle distance for a while. "You'll be fine, Todd," she said finally. "Things will

work out better without me, you'll see. I'll find someone to take care of you,

Eppstadt'll find a movie for you, and you'll be back in front of the cameras in a

few months, looking perfect. If that's what you want."

"Why wouldn't I want that?" he said to her.

She looked at him wearily. "Maybe because none of it's worth a damn."

He knew he had a riposte for that; he just couldn't figure out what it was

at that particular moment. And while he was trying to figure it out, Maxine turned

her back on him and walked out.

He let her go. What was the use of a feud? That was for the lawyers.

Besides, he had more urgent business than trading insults with her. He had to find

Katya.

The afternoon sun was not just warm, it was hot, and the foliage was busy

with hungry hummingbirds and the canyon was quiet and perfect. He threaded his way

through the overgrown bushes, past the tennis courts and the antique sundial, up

towards the guest-house. The gradient became quite steep after a time, the narrow

Page 86

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

steps decayed by time and neglect, so that in some spots they'd collapsed

completely. After a while, he realized the path had divided at some earlier point,

and that he'd taken the wrong turning. The mistake took him on a picturesque tour of

the gardens' hidden places, bringing him first to a small grove of walnut trees, in

the middle of which stood a large gazebo in an advanced state of disrepair, and then

into a garden within a garden, bounded by an unkempt privet hedge. Here there were

roses, or rather the remains of last year's blooms, the bushes fighting for space,

and strangling each other in the process. There was no way through the thorny tangle

to pick up the path on the other side, so he was obliged to try and get

around the

garden from the outside, staying close to the hedge. It was difficult to do. Though

the plants he was striding through didn't have thorns, they were still unruly and

wild; twigs and dead flowers scraped at his face, his shirt was quickly soiled, his

sneakers filled with stony dirt. By the time he got to the other side of the garden,

and took to the path again, he was short of breath and patience; and had two dozen

little nicks and scratches to call his own.

His wanderings had brought him to a spot that offered a spectacular view. He

could see the big house below him surrounded by palms and Birds of Paradise; he

could see the baroque weathervane on the top of the gazebo he'd passed on his way

here, and the orchid house, which he had come upon on one of his earlier trips

around the garden. All this, bathed in clear warm California light; the crystalline

light which had brought filmmakers here almost a century before. Not for the first

time since coming to the house he had a pleasurable sense of history; and a measure

of curiosity as to the people who might once have walked here, talked here. What

ambitions had they plotted, as they ambled through these gardens?
Had they been

sophisticates, or simpletons? What little he knew about Old
Hollywood he'd heard

from Jerry Brahms, which meant he'd only ever really been half-
listening. But he

knew enough to be certain those times had been good, at least for a
man like

himself. Douglas Fairbanks and Rudolph Valentino, Charlie Chaplin,
the Barrymore

clan, and all the rest had been like royalty, lording it over their new
dominion in

the West. A bean-counting prick like Eppstadtówith his demographics
and his endless

corporate maneuveringówould have had no power in the world this
canyon still

preserved.

Having caught his breath, he now continued his ascent. The shrubbery
became

denser the closer he got to the guest-house. He would have needed a
machete to hack

through it efficiently; but, lacking one, had to do with a branch he
picked up on

his way. The flowers gave up their perfume as he beat his way
through them, and he

recognized their scent. It was her scent. The scent on Katya's skin. Did
she walk

naked amongst them, he wondered, pressing the flowers against her
body? Now that

would be a sight to see.

The thought of this had stirred him up; he actually had a hard-on. Not an

everyday order of hard-on either, but the kind that was so strong it actually hurt.

It was a long time since he'd had a woodie so fierce, and it added immeasurably to

his sense of well-being. With the guest-house now in view he pressed towards his

goal, feeling curiously, happily, adolescent. So what the hell if Maxine was

deserting him? What the hell if he'd never be a Golden Boy again? He was still alive

and kicking, still had a stick in his hand, and a woodie in his pants, and the

thought of Katya's flower bath in his mind's eye.

The thicket had finally thinned, and he was at last delivered onto a small

unkempt lawn. The house before him was a two-story affair, built in the same style

as the main house, simply on a much more modest scale. Above the door, set into the

stucco, was a single tile, with a man on a horse painted upon it. He glanced up at

it for only a moment. Then he pressed his flattened hand down the front of his jeans

to push his erection into a less obvious position on the clock, and knocked on the

madwoman's door.

THREE

There was no reply from within, nor any sound of movement in response to his

knocking. He knocked a second time, and then-after a short pause-a third. Still

there was no response, so he tried the latch. The door was unlocked. He pushed it

open, and stepped out of the sunlight into the cool interior of the house.

At first glance he assumed that he'd misunderstood what Katya had told him,

and the house was not occupied after all; merely used as a storage space of some

kind. The room before him, which was large and high-ceilinged, was little more than

Page 87

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

a junk-room, filled with furniture and bric-a-brac. But as his eyes became more

accustomed to the murky light, after the blaze of sun outside, he began to make

sense of what he was seeing. Yes, the place was over-filled, but the contents of the

room were far from junk. On the wall to the left hung an enormous tapestry depicting

a scene of medieval revelry; on the wall opposite was a series of white marble

bas-reliefs that looked to have been filched from a Roman temple. In the far corner,

close to a great oak door, were more slabs of stone, these carved with hieroglyphics. There was an elegant chaise longue in front of the massive fireplace;

and a table, its legs elaborately carved with baroque grotesqueries, stood in the

middle of the room. All of this had presumably been removed from the big house at

some point, but that hardly explained the strange confusion of periods and styles.

Moving deeper into the room, Todd called out again to announce his presence.

Again, there was no reply. He didn't linger now to study the furniture or the

antiquities, but crossed the room to the large oak door. Here again he knocked, but

receiving no reply, he turned the carved handle, and pushed the door open. Given its

size, he'd expected it to be heavy, but it wasn't. On the other side was a wide

hallway, the walls of which were hung with white masks. No, not masks, life-casts;

white plaster faces, all caught with that expression of eerie, enforced repose that

such masks always wore. He'd had similar things made of his own face, by special

effects men. Once for the facewound in Gunner, once for a bullet wound. It was an

eerie experience, to look at the finished work. This is what I'll look like when I'm

dead, he'd thought when he'd been shown the final results.

There were thirty or forty masks displayed on the wall; mostly of men. He

thought that he vaguely recognized some of the faces, but he couldn't have put names

to any of them. They were all handsome; some of them almost beautiful. He remembered

Katya's crazy talk about the parties she'd had in the house. How she'd seduced

Valentino. Was this collection the inspiration for that fantasy? Had she dreamed of

fucking the famous because she had plaster copies of their faces up on her wall?

The door at the other end of the wall of life-masks was, like the last,

deceptively light. This time he paused to puzzle out why, and examining it a little

more closely, had his answer. It was fake. The large rusted nails weren't iron at

all, but carved and stippled wood; the patina of antiquity had been achieved by a

skilled painter. It was a door from a movie-set; all illusion. And if the doors had

been made that way, what about the tapestry and the bas-reliefs and table carved

with grotesqueries? They were all most likely fakes. Stolen off a backlot, or

bought from a studio fire-sale. None of it was real.

He pushed the door open, and came into a second room, this one much smaller

than the first, but just as cluttered. On the wall opposite him hung a large mirror,

its gilt frame elaborately carved with naked figures, men and women knotted together

in configurations which looked both sensual and tormented. He seldom let a mirror go

by without putting it to use, and even now-knowing he wouldn't like what he saw-he

paused and assessed his reflection. He was a sad sight, his clothes in disarray from

his trip through the shrubbery, his face like an inept copy of its finer self. He

wondered if perhaps he shouldn't turn back; he was in no condition to present

himself to Katya. Even as he was thinking about this the door to the left of the

mirror creaked a little, and-caught by the wind-opened a couple of inches. Forsaking

his sorry reflection, he went to the door and peered into the room beyond.

The sight before him put all thought of retreat from his mind. Inside was an

enormous four-poster bed, its columns decorated in the same lushly erotic style as

the gilded frame of the mirror. A swathe of dark purple velvet hung in ripe folds

like a half-raised curtain. The red pillows heaped on the bed were just as

excessive, creamy silk fringed with lace. The sheet, which was also silk, was pulled

back, so that the sleeper was left uncovered.

It was Katya, of course.

There she lay, face-down; her hair unloosed, her body naked. He stood at the

door, enraptured. The pillow she lay on was so soft and deep that her face was

almost concealed, but he could still see the high curve of her cheek, the tender

pink of her ear. Was she awake behind her pale lids, he wondered, her nakedness a

deliberate provocation? He suspected not. There was something too artless about the

way her legs were splayed, too childlike about the way her hands were tucked up

against her breasts. And the final proof? She was snoring. If this was indeed a

performance then that was a touch of genius. The perfectly human thing which made

all the rest so believable.

His eyes went to the cleft of her buttocks; to the gloss of the hair that

Page 88

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

showed between her legs. He was suddenly stupid with lust.

He took a step towards the bed. The floor creaked under his weight, but

thankfully the noise wasn't loud enough to stir her. He continued his approach, his

gaze fixed upon her face, looking for the merest flutter of a lash. But there was

none. She was deeply asleep; and dreaming. He was close enough now to see that her

eyes were in motion behind her lids, watching something happening in another place.

At the bedside, he dropped down onto his haunches, his left knee popping

loudly. There was a faint dusting of goose-flesh on her limbs, he saw. He couldn't

resist the temptation to reach out and touch her skin, as though he might smooth the

gooseflesh away with his fingertips. Surely she would wake now, he thought. But no,

she slept on. The only sign that she might be surfacing from sleep was the slowing

of the motion of her pupils. The dream was leaving her; or she was departing from

the dream.

He was suddenly alarmed. What would she think, if she woke to find him this

close to the bed, his intent so unquestionably voyeuristic? Perhaps he should go;

quickly, before she woke. But he couldn't bring himself to move an inch. All he

could do was kneel there, like a suppliant, his heart beating furiously,
his face a

furnace.

Then, in her sleep, she murmured something. He held his breath,
trying to

catch the words. It wasn't English she was speaking, it was an Eastern
European

language; probably her native Romanian. He could make no sense of
what she was

saying, of course, but there was a softness to the syllables; a neediness,
which

suggested they were supplications. She turned her face up from the
pillow, and he

saw that her expression was troubled. Her brow was furrowed, and
there were tears

welling beneath her lids. The sight of her distress bothered him. It
brought back

memories of his mother's tears, which he'd watched her shed so often
as a child.

Tears shed by a woman left to raise her sons alone. Tears of frustrated
rage,

sometimes; but more often tears of loneliness.

"Don't..." he said to her softly.

She heard him speaking, it seemed. Her entreaties grew quieter. Then
she

said: "Willem?"

"No..."

The frown nicking her brow deepened and her lids began to flutter.
She was

waking up now, no doubt of that. He got to his feet, and began to
retreat to the

door, keeping his eyes fixed on her face. Only when he reached the
door did he

finally, regretfully, relinquish sight of her and turn away.

As he slipped through the door he heard her speak. "Wait," she said.

He was sorely tempted to exit rather than turn and face her, but he
resisted

his cowardice and looked back towards the bed.

She had pulled the sheet a little way up, to partially cover her
nakedness.

Her eyes were open, and the tears her dreams had induced were now
running down her

cheeks. Despite them, she was smiling.

"I'm sorry," Todd said.

"For what?"

"Coming in here uninvited."

"No," she said sweetly. "I wanted you to come."

"Still, I shouldn't have stayed...watching you. It's just that you were
talking in your sleep."

"Well it's nice to have somebody listening," she said. "It's a long time
since anyone was with me when I slept." She wiped the tears from her
cheeks.

"Are you all right?" he asked her.

"Yes, I'm fine."

"Were you having a bad dream?"

"I can't remember," she said, glancing away from him. He knew from his

acting coach what such glances indicated: a lie. She knew exactly what she'd been

dreaming about; she just didn't want to tell him. Well, that was her business. God

knows everybody was allowed their share of secrets.

"What time is it?" she said.

He glanced at his watch. "Almost four-thirty."

"You want to go for a walk before it gets too dark?" she said.

"Sure."

She threw off her sheet, and got up out of bed, glancing up at Todd as she

did so, as though to assure herself of his scrutiny.

"I'm going to bathe first," she said. "Would you do me a little favour in

Page 89

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

the meantime?"

"Sure."

"Go back to the Gaming Room, where we met last night, and-"

"Don't tell me. Fetch your whip."

She smiled. "You read my mind."

As long as you promise not to be beating me with it."

"Nothing could be further from my mind," she said.

"Okay. I'll get it...but no beating."

"Take your time. There's still plenty of light in the sky."

He left her feeling oddly light-footed, pleased to have an errand from her.

What did that say about her relationship, he wondered as he ran? That he was

naturally subservient? Ready to do her will at the snap of her fingers. Well, if so,

so.

He found his way back down to the big house without difficulty. Marco heard

him in the Gaming Room, heavy-footed as ever, and came to see what all the noise was

about.

"You okay?"

"That's all you ever ask. Am I okay? Yes. I'm better than okay."

"Good. Only I heard from Maxine-

"Fuck Maxine."

"So it doesn't bother you?"

"No. We had a good run together. Now it's over."

He picked up the switch from the mantelpiece.

"What the hell is that?"

"What does it look like?"

He beat the air two or three times. The switch was beautifully balanced; he

could imagine learning how to use it with considerable cunning. Perhaps she would

let him stroke her body with it.

Marco studied him in silence for a few moments; then he said: "You never

told me why you took your bandages off. Were they too tight?"

"I didn't take them off. She took them off."

"Who's she?"

"The woman who owns this house. Katya Lupescu."

"I'm sorry, you've lost me."

Todd smiled. "No more explanations," he said. "You'll meet her later. I gotta go."

He left Marco standing at the door with a befuddled expression on his face,

and headed out into the light again, climbing the slope towards Katya's house, aware

that he was behaving like a man who'd just been given a new lease on life.

He didn't call her name as he entered this time. He simply made his way

through the rooms of fake relics.

The sound of running water came from the room adjacent to the bedroom.

Apparently, Katya was still running her bath.

He paused and looked around the bedroom. There were several enormous posters

on the wall, which he had not noticed until now. Framed posters: one-sheets for

movies, many decades old to judge by the stylized graphics, and the yellowing of the

paper they were printed on. The same image dominated all seven posters: that of a

woman's face. She was represented in two of them as a waif, a child-woman lost in a

predatory world. But in the others she'd matured beyond the orphan, and these were

the images that reminded him of the woman he'd met last night-an exquisite femme

fatale glowering from the frames as she planned her next act of anarchy. There was,

of course, no question who the woman was. Her name was on the posters, big and bold.

The Sorrows of Frederick, starring Katya Lupi. The Devil's Bride, starring Katya

Lupi. She is Destruction, starring Katya Lupi.

What the hell was he to make of this new piece of evidence? Of course it was

possible that Katya had paid to have seven posters representing fictitious films

printed on aged paper and framed to look like objects of antiquity, but it wasn't

very likely. Was it possible this Katya Lupi-who bore such a resemblance to the

Katya he knew-was hardly the same woman at all but a granddaughter, with an uncanny

resemblance to her older relative? It was a more plausible solution than any other

he could think of. Certainly the flawless woman he'd seen naked minutes before, her

face without so much as a wrinkle upon it, could not be the woman who'd starred in

these movies. There had to be some other explanation.

He was about to call out and announce his presence when he heard a soft

Page 90

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

intake of breath echoing off the bathroom walls. He went quietly to the door, and

glanced in. In a large, old-fashioned ceramic bath, half-filled with water, lay

Katya, her legs spread, her hips lifted clear of the water so that he could see how

her fingers slid inside her. Her eyes were closed.

Not for the first time this afternoon, Todd could feel the head of his dick

tapping out the rhythm of his pulse against the inside of his pants. But he had no

desire to interrupt Katya's game. He was perfectly happy to watch her:
her face in

ecstasy, her breasts clearing from the water as her body arched, her
legs lifted up

and straddling the sides of the bath. The mysteries of who she was and
how she came

to be here suddenly seemed absurdly irrelevant. What the hell did it
matter? Look at

her!

"Did you bring it?"

He'd had his eyes on her cunt; but when he looked back up at her face
she

was staring at him, her expression fierce with need.

"The Teroarea. Did you bring it?"

He was mortified with embarrassment, but plainly she couldn't have
cared

less. She had other priorities.

"Yes," he said, showing her the switch. "I brought it."

"So use it."

"What?"

She lifted her hips even higher, spreading her legs to give him a full
view

of her sex. It was ripened by her own touches; but also, he knew, from
the

anticipation of his return.

"Touch it," she said. "Lightly."

His target stood proud of its hood, presented for his delectation.

"Please," she begged.

He took four steps to the bottom of the bath, keeping his eyes fixed upon

her. He felt the weight of the switch in his hand. He'd never done anything remotely

like this before, but something about the way her body was contorted to offer her

sex up to him lent him confidence.

"Are you ready?"

"Just do it!"

He lifted the Terror. Her clitoris looked as hard and as red as a ruby. He

lay the switch on it with a short little stab that made her sob.

"Again!" she demanded immediately.

The ruby was already a little redder.

"Again!" she said.

He struck her again, twice, three times, four and five and six, while every

muscle in her body went rigid so as to be his perfect target. "More?" he said.

There were tears on her face, but she simply growled at him between gritted

teeth. He took it to mean yes, and went to work again, until the sweat was running

from his face, and down his back, his breath was rough with exertion.

But she would

not let him stop. Her gaze, her sneer, her offered body spoke the same demand, and

he dutifully answered it, over and over and over and-

Suddenly her eyes rolled up in her head. Her mouth opened. He could barely

make sense of the words, they were so thick with feeling. "Again." Her pupils had

almost gone from sight. "Once." He lifted the Terror, which for all its liteness,

its lightness, suddenly felt brutal in his aching hand. Her body had started to

shake. He was shaking too, now. But the Terror had its own imperative. Down it came

once more.

She let out a cry that sounded more like something a bird would utter than a

woman. Then her limbs lost their solidity, and her legs slipped gracefully off the

sides of the bath. A tiny plume of crimson tinted the water.

He dropped the switch and retreated to the door, in a kind of childish

terror at what he'd done; and at how much it had aroused him. Katya's eyes had

closed. The expression on her face was one of childish contentment; an infant

sleeping in the arms of innocence.

He slid down the door-frame into a squatting position, and there-

exhausted

by the intensity of the previous minutes, he must have briefly fallen asleep,

because when he opened his eyes again the water was still moving, but Katya had

vacated the tub. Vacated the bathroom too, in fact. He didn't have to get up to find

her. He merely had to swing his head round, to see that she was sitting on the edge

of the bed, her legs open, looking at her reflection in the long oval mirror. The

Page 91

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

expression of contentment had not left her face; but now there was a little smile on

her lips too.

She had a wide repertoire of smiles, he thought; or at least it seemed he'd

seen a lot in the short time they'd known one another. There was her teasing smile,

her mischievous smile, her dark smile, her dry smile. This one had a little of

everything in it. She knew he was watching her, so there was something of her

performance smile in it. But it certainly wasn't phony. How fake could someone be

when she'd just let her body lead her into such extremes? Surely he was one of a

rare order of men: those to whom she'd given herself in that profound way. He

thought of the tinted blood rising up between her legs, and felt a peculiar mingling

of retroactive alarm (what had he been doing, risking her most tender anatomy with

nothing but the look on her face to guide him?) and exhilaration that they'd come

through it together: their first shared insanity. Whoever she was, trespasser,

lunatic, stalker, star, all other possible definitions paled before this: she was

the woman who had taught him how insignificant the flesh between his legs was when

it came to the pleasuring of certain women.

"Come here," she said.

He pushed himself up off the doorframe and went over to her. "Let me see,"

she said, unbuckling his pants.

"I came..."

"I know."

His trousers were massively too big, which was the way he liked to wear

them. As soon as his belt was unbuckled, they fell down. He was afraid his dick

would make a sorry show by now, shriveled up in a crinkled skin of dried semen. But

no. His erection had been so furiously hard it remained quite impressive, even

though it was sodden. He could not imagine any other woman with whom he'd had sex

taking such guileless pleasure in the perusal of his quarter-hard dick. Nor would

any of those women have leaned forward, as Katya now did, and kissed it.

"May I look at you?" he said.

She assumed he didn't mean her face. She spread her legs. He hoisted his

pants back tip and went down on his knees.

"Does it hurt?" he said.

"Yes," she said. She put her hand on the back of his head, gently pressing

him towards her body. "Look inside me," she said. "Don't be afraid. You did it. See

what you did?"

He could see without opening her up. Her whole pubic region was puffy and

inflamed.

"Go on, look," she said. "Enjoy what you did."

He gently parted her labia, which were sticky beneath his fingertips. Not

blood, not sweat. Just the natural juices of an aroused body.

"You see?" she said, pressing his fingers deeper into her. She was like a

furnace in there. "You've got thoughts going round in your head you never imagined

having. Am I right?"

He replied by gently scooping her juices out on his fingers and putting them

deep into his mouth.

"You want to lick me out?"

He shook his head.

"I'm afraid I'd draw more blood."

"Maybe I'd like that."

"Give me time."

She took his fingers out of his mouth and replaced them with her tongue.

"You're right," she said, when they'd finished kissing. "We've got all the time in the world."

She stood up. He stayed where he was, at her feet, still not quite believing

they'd come so far so fast.

"It isn't a dream," she said, reading his doubts as she'd read so many other

thoughts of his in the last twenty-four hours. "Sometimes it seems that way, but

that's just the Canyon."

He held onto her leg for a moment, kissing the inside of her thigh.

"We were going to walk, remember?" she said.

"You still want to?"

"Oh yes. I'd love to. It's a perfect night for introductions."

Page 92

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

PART FIVE

DESIRE

ONE

The Canyon had once been a kind of Eden for Zeffer; its bowers had been

places of comfort, an escape from a world that was growing too tawdry too quickly

for his taste. But that was many, many years ago. Now he hated his sometime

paradise. It was a place of confinement and punishment; a lush hell, made all the

more agonizing because he knew that just beyond the perimeters his mistress Katya

had set were streets that he'd once driven around like a lord. The passage of years

had transformed them, of course; probably out of all recognition. Seven decades was

a long time. And if he climbed the southern flank of the Canyon, and stood on the

ridge-which was on the very limits of his proscribed domain-then he could see the

towers of what looked to him like a city within a city, where in his day there had

been little more than a dirt road and some sagebrush. They had owned land down

there, he and Katya, once upon a time. Probably the lawyers had taken their profits

and died by now. But then he couldn't remember signing papers over to any other

authority, so it was just possible then if someone was to question who owned the

land on which that gleaming city stood, the paper trail would lead back to Katya

Lupescu and Willem Matthias Zeffer.

There had been a time when Katya had been quite acquisitive: she'd been

rich, and the land had been cheap, so she'd had him buy large plots of it, hundreds

of acres in fact, as an investment. She'd got the idea from Douglas Fairbanks and

Mary Pickford, who had also made large purchases, saying, with considerable

foresight, that as long as there was a hunger for people to be distracted from their

unhappiness, there would be a need for this new world of theirs, this Hollywoodland.

It followed, then, that the ground on which that New World was built would only grow

in value.

Many times Zeffer had been tempted to leave the Canyon and venture down the

hill to discover what it all looked like now, but he didn't dare. Katya had told him

plainly what the consequences would be if he ever tried to leave. There would be no

way back for him. She would see to it that he was torn limb from limb by those

amongst the haunters of these hills who were loyal to her; the creatures she

referred to as los ninos: the children.

He didn't doubt that she would enforce the edict. She knew what power she

held, and how to keep it. His death would be a fine lesson for those amongst the

dans here who were less than loyal, and muttered their unrest in the ears of

coyotes, and plotted the undoing of their mistress. They called her by many names,

in many languages, being men and women who had come from all over the world, and

now, in this strange afterlife, were returning to the tongue they knew best. To some

she was La Catin, the Bitch; to others she was simply the Duchess of Sorrows. But

none of these name-callers dared confront her. Whatever they whispered, whatever

they plotted, they were too afraid of what they would lose if they went up against

her and failed to win the day. Not only did they hope for her clemency at some time

in the future, but they prayed with all their hearts that they'd be let back into

the house, so that they could once more venture down the stairs into the Devil's

Country, where they had once tasted something that was in their blood now

permanently and could not be satisfied, except by more of the same.

He understood their hunger. He shared it. And if she would let him back into

the house then all the agonies of this half-life of his would be erased; all pain

forgotten, all need dispatched. But Willem had few hopes of such clemency. Katya was

crazy. She always had been, of course; indeed in earlier times it had been part of

her glamour. Wasn't that part of what had made her so incredible to watch up there

on the screen? A gleam of madness always lit up the eyes of her characters, whatever

she was playing. Her innocents were crazy with their sinlessness; just as the vamps

she played later were maddened by their sin. Of all the names that she was called,

it was Cesar Romero's nickname that suited her best, La Puta Enojada, the Mad Bitch.

That was the name Zeffer used when he talked about her. Katya, La Puta Enojada. But

bitch or no, mad or no, she had the reins, and that was that. She was not going to

with her any time soon, thanks to the machinations of that damnable room; nor was she

likely to get up one morning and vacate her Canyon. She was just as afraid of the

world beyond its perimeters as he was. In truth, for all her bombast and her

brutality, it was fear that shaped her life.

Fear of living, fear of dying. Fear of staying, fear of going. Fear of

Page 93

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

remembering, and yes, fear of forgetting.

But every now and again, even in this despairing paradise, there would come

a glimpse of hope; a hint of a chance that things might finally change for the

better. Such hints and glimpses usually appeared in the form of interlopers; people

whose unplanned presence in the Canyon had the potential to subtly change the

balance of power in La Puta Enojada's feudal realm.

There had been perhaps a dozen such opportunities during in the time in

which Zeffer had been a prisoner of the Canyon, all in their way dangers to the

status quo, and all carefully managed by Katya, so as to prevent the destruction of

her autocracy. The most notable, until now, had been the appearance

of a runaway

child, one Jerry Brahms, who had fled his minders into the Canyon,
ignorant of the

mysteries he was treading amongst. He'd almost brought her down,
that one, coming

into the house without anyone realizing he was there, and getting his
fingers into

places they had no business being. Opening doors; letting the ghosts
sniff the Hunt.

The fact that he was a child had made her indulgent of his mistakes.
Rather than

have him killed, Katya had let him live; brought him to her bosom, in
fact.

It was an act of trust that had served her well as the years had passed.

Brahms the boy had become Brahms the man, and his loyalty had
remained unwavering.

Zeffer had never entirely understood what had happened between
them, but he had his

suspensions. Katya had shown Brahms pleasures that had marked him
as hers forever.

That meant, most likely, that she had taken him down to see the Hunt.
Once you'd

walked in the Devil's Country, smelt its ancient air, you belonged to
that place, in

some unspeakable way. It owned you. He didn't need to look any
further than his own

body for evidence of this. Since Katya had forbidden him to enter the
house-keeping

him from close proximity to the tiles-he had started to look and feel his true age.

His hair had turned white, his bones and joints ached perpetually. Why was he

surprised? Nobody lived forever. Not movie goddesses, nor the men who served them.

And certainly not houses, however much rapture they contained. Every facade cracked,

finally; and crumbled; and went away to dust. It was only a question of time.

Which thought brought him back to the newest trespasser in their sealed

world: the most promising opportunity for an undoing of long-held certainties he'd

seen in many years. She was a strong one, this big-boned, big-breasted woman with

her unhappy eyes. She was trouble, thank God. Under the right circumstances a woman

like that could do all kinds of mischief. If, of course, she was still alive. She'd

been snatched away by los ninos, the corrupt children of the Canyon, offspring of

unsavory couplings between animals and ghosts. Zeffer had witnessed such intercourse

many times over the years; vile marriages between ghost women and coyotes; ghost men

and deer, or dogs; even once, a woman and a bird. Somehow, such consummations were

often fruitful, though the birthings were not anything he could have

imagined until

he laid eyes on them. The animals who produced infants this way almost always died

in the process; every now and again he would come upon one of their rotted carcasses

on the hillside, and he'd know that another hybrid had been added to that unholy

tribe. The revenant women who allowed such congress (some of them famous in their

day, reduced in their frustration and madness to mating with wild animals), these

women seemed to show no signs of trauma when the birth was over, their bodies being

less than flesh and more than ether; malleable, mendable. But that was not to say

their matings were without consequence. These ghosts were also the wildest, in his

experience; the most prone to sudden violence. The beast had got into them in more

ways than one. They were touched by a kind of rabidity, which was in distressing

contrast to what remained of their elegance. Their glossy skins were pulled tight

over something feral; and their beauty could not conceal it. Women who had once been

household names-paragons of elegance and sophistication-walking on all fours, their

gait crabbed, their speed uncanny; baring their perfect teeth in the thicket and

yelping like coyotes who'd just come upon a fresh kill.

There was reason, then, for him to believe the interloper had not survived

her abduction. If they'd caught up with her, los ninos might have toyed with her for

awhile, but they were stupid things, and their attention spans were short. It would

not take them long to decide that there'd be more sport in hurting the woman than in

teasing her, and once her blood began to run they'd become frenzied, and fall upon

her, taking her limb from limb.

That was his fear.

The source of his hope? That he had not heard any death-cries in the canyon

since she'd been gone. It was a tiny reason to believe that something good might

Page 94

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

come of the woman's arrival here, but he had to have some little measure of hope, or

there was nothing. So in the absence of hearing the woman's screams, he allowed

himself to believe that there was one in the Canyon who would might the undoing of

Katya Lupi.

TWO

Tammy was indeed alive. She knew she was alive because she was hungry. It

was the only thing about her present condition which she really recognized; the rest

was a kind of fever-dream, filled with blurred horrors; remote pieces of what might

be real and what she hoped to God were not.

She had been carried by her abductors to the far end of the Canyon where

there was no sign of any habitation. The area was pretty much jungle: dense thickets

of barbed shrubs, overshadowed by stands of immense, shaggy palms. There was no way

to climb up any of these trees, to escape those who'd brought her here (though even

if she'd been able to do so, she was certain they would sniff her out); nor was

there any way to move more than a few steps through the thicket So she was left with

only one option: she had to confront her abductors.

It was her mother's gift to her, this evenheadedness. In circumstances that

would have brought lesser minds to the point of collapse, Edith Huxley Lauper (Ma

Edie to everyone who'd ever knew her for more than a day), had been uncannily calm.

And the more panicky people around her had become, the calmer she'd get. It made her

an ideal nurse, which was the work she'd done all her life. She soothed the hurt,

she soothed the dying, she soothed the bereft. Everything's fine, she would say in

that soft voice of hers (another of her gifts to Tammy); and by some miracle

everyone would believe her. Very often, because people believed her, the panic

ceased and everything was fine. It was a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy.

So now, sitting in the thicket, in the midst of this fever dream, with its

voices and its faces and its stink, she repeated Ma Edie's mantra to herself, over

and over: Everything's fine, everything's fine, everything's fine, waiting for it to

turn out true.

Her head still throbbed from the white light that had wiped out the world

before her abduction; and her stomach was certainly in need of filling, but she

still had all her limbs, for which she was grateful, and a voice in her throat. So,

once she'd calmed herself down, she started to talk to whatever it was that had come

after her, (and was still there, in the vicinity) her volume quiet, but her tone

insistent enough that she would not be mistaken for somebody who was afraid.

"I'd like to get back to the house now," she said to them, "so will one of

you please escort me?" She scanned the bushes. They were watching her. She could see

the glitter of their eyes, the gleam of their teeth. What were they? They didn't

seem quite substantial; she had the feeling that their flesh was not as solid as

hers, as real perhaps; yet they'd possessed enough strength to remove her from the

vicinity of Zeffer's cage to this corner of nowhere, so they weren't to be

disrespected.

"Do you understand me?" she'd said, keeping her tone even. "I need to go

back to the house."

Off to her left she saw a motion in the thicket, and one of the creatures

approached her, coming close enough that for the first time she'd had a proper view

of one of the abductors. It was a female, no doubt of that, and vaguely related to a

human being. The creature's naked body was scrawny, her ribs showing through flesh

that seemed to be covered with light gray-silver hair. The front limbs were

extremely delicate, and she surely had hands and fingers not pads and claws. But the

back legs were as crooked as a dog's, and rather too large for the rest of her

anatomy, so that squatting her proportions were almost frog-like.

But the head: that was the worst of her. Her mouth was nearly human, as was

her nose, but then the skull curved and suddenly flattened so that her eyes, which

were devoid of whites, and set to either side of the skull, like the eyes of a

sheep, stuck out, black and shiny and stupid.

She turned her head and stared at Tammy with her shiny eyes. Then, from

those human lips came the scraps of a voice. "It's no use to beg," she told Tammy.

"We eat you."

Tammy took this in her stride; or at least did all she could to give that impression. "I'm not begging you for anything," she said, very calmly. "And you're

not going to eat me."

Page 95

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"Oh?" said another voice, this time over to her right.

Tammy moved slowly, so as not to invite anything precipitous. She looked at

the second speaker, who-like the female-had come closer to her. She guessed this was

a male; one of the creatures who'd snatched her away from between the cages. He had

a head of ungainly size and shape, his nose flattened out like the nose of a bat,

his mouth wide and lipless. Only his eyes were human; and they were unexpectedly and

exquisitely blue.

"What shall we do with you then?" he said to Tammy, the slits of his nostrils flattening as he inhaled her scent.

"Help me," she said. The male lowered his lumpen head, and stared at her

from under the weight of his brow. "I need to get back to the house," Tammy said.

"You know the Lady?" said the female. "What Lady?"

"In the house?"

A third voice now; a thin, reedy voice in the darkness behind the female.

"Kat. Ee. A." the voice said.

"Katya?" Tammy said.

"Yes," said the male. "Katya."

He had come closer to her, and was now sniffing around her hair. She didn't

protect herself, even though flecks of his cold phlegm were hitting her neck and

face. She just kept her focus, as best she could. Perhaps these freaks, for all

their bizarrrity, knew something about why Todd was here. If she was going to free

him she had to know what she was freeing him from.

"What do you want with Katya?" Tammy said, keeping her options open as to

whether she knew the woman or not.

At the mention of Katya's name a series of little convulsions had taken over

the female. She threw back her head, showing a throat as lovely as Garbo's. After a

moment, the convulsions subsided. Once they were governed, the woman gave Tammy her

answer.

"She is the one who has the Hunt."

There wasn't much illumination to be had from this. But Tammy pursued the

questioning, not hoping for much. "What hunt?" she asked, keeping her voice low and

even.

"The Devil's Hunt," said the male, still close to her.

"You seen it?" the female said.

"No," Tammy replied.

"Liar."

"If I'd seen it I'd tell you I'd seen it. But I haven't."

"You been in the house?"

"No I haven't," Tammy said. "Why, is this hunt you're talking about in the

house?"

"The Hunt's in the house."

This part was even more puzzling than the earlier stuff. Plainly her sources

were not terribly reliable. Were they referring to some sort of game that Katya

played?

"Have you ever been in the house?" she asked them.

"No," said the female.

"But you want to go?"

"Oh yes," she said. "I want to see how it is."

"Well..." Tammy said, "Perhaps I could help you get in...to the house."

The female regarded her warily, moving her head back and forth to assess

Tammy with both eyes.

"It's not possible," she said.

"Why not?"

It was the male who answered, and the phrase he used was powerful but

incomprehensible. "Death at the threshold." he said.

There were mutters and growls from others in the undergrowth at the mention

of the threshold. She had no doubt that for all their apparent strength

these

creatures were deathly afraid of the house, and, no doubt, of its mistress.

"Has this woman Katya done you some harm?" she asked the female. The

creature shook its wretched head.

"Kill her one day."

"You want to kill her?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

Page 96

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

The woman just stared, her stare containing a profound distrust. Not just of

Tammy, or indeed of Katya: of the world, but of being alive. It was as though every

breathing moment was conditional; an agony. And despite the brutal foulness of the

thing's appearance, Tammy felt some measure of sympathy for it.

"Maybe I could get this Katya to come out," Tammy suggested.

The male growled, deep in his chest. "You'd do that?" Tammy was ready to

make any promise right now, to get out of her present predicament. She nodded.

There was a long moment, in which the freaks did not reply. Then, glancing

around the company of her fellows, as if to check that she would not be challenged,

the female caught hold of Tammy's wrist, and pulled her up out of the thicket.

"We're going?" Tammy said.

"Yes! Yes!" the female replied. "Quickly, though. Quickly." She didn't get

any argument from Tammy, who was happy to be on her way. Whatever dangers the house

held they could hardly be worse than staying out here in the open. The day was

quickly passing away. It would soon be dark. And judging by the repeated glances the

woman gave the sky, she too was cognizant of the failing light. After the third or

fourth glance Tammy couldn't help but ask her what she was so nervous about.

"Peacock," she said. A peacock? There had been peacocks here? It wasn't so

surprising, on second thoughts. It fitted with the extravagance of the place. But

they belonged on well-clipped lawns, not in this jungle of thorns and flowers. And

even assuming the bird could push its way through the thicket without being stripped

of all its finery, what could it do if did catch up with them? They had bad tempers,

she remembered reading once, but they were nervous things. She'd just shoo it away.

"Nothing to be scared of," Tammy said.

The woman gave her another disconcerting sideways look. The male, meanwhile,

came up beside Tammy and stared at her breasts. Not about to be intimidated, Tammy

she stared back. There was something vaguely recognizable in this freak; a cast to

his features which reminded her of somebody famous. Who the hell was it? Some movie

star. Was it Victor Mature? Yes, it was. Victor Mature. It was uncanny.

The lookalike, meanwhile, leaned forward, hooked a long cold finger through

a hole in Tammy's blouse and before she could do a damn thing about it, tore the

light cotton blouse away from her skin.

"You keep away from me," she told the offender.

He bared his teeth at her. "Pretty boobies," he said.

"What?"

The forbidding grimace had transformed into a weird version of a smile.

"Titties," he said.

He reached out and touched the side of her breast with his open palm, stroking it. "Jugs. Knockers-"

"Baby feeders," Tammy added, figuring it was better to play along with the

joke, however witless.

"Fun bags," he grinned, almost moronically.

She wondered just for a moment if that was the answer to this mystery: that

these pitiful remnants of humanity were cretins, mongols, retards; the children of

Hollywood parents who could not bear the idea that they'd produced such freaks, and

given them over to somebody who'd simply dumped them in the empty Canyon. No, that

was ridiculous. Atrocities like that didn't happen in this day and age; it was

unthinkably callous. But it did go some way to explaining the curious passages of

starry flesh and bone she kept seeing: Garbo's throat on the woman, Victor Mature in

this breast-obsessed male.

"Udders," he said.

"Jigglies," she countered. "Chi-chis. Kazooms-"

Oh, she had a million. So presumably did every woman with larger than

average breasts in America. It had started when she was twelve, when thanks to an

unfortunate hormonal trick she was walking around with a bosom that would have

looked just fine on a big-boned twenty-two-year-old. Suddenly men were looking at

her, and the dirty words just came tumbling out of their mouths. She went through a

phase when she thought every man in Sacramento had Tourette's Syndrome. Never mind

that the girl with the hooters was twelve; men got diarrhea of the mouth at the

sight of large breasts. She had them called everything: 'the twins', 'skin-pillows',

her 'rack', her 'set', her 'mounds', her 'missiles', her 'melons', her

'milk-makers'. At first it upset her to be the object of fun, but after a while she

learned not to listen to it anymore, unless some unusual name came along to swell

the lexicon, like 'global superstars', or 'bodacious ta-tas', both of which had

Page 97

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

brought a despairing smile to her face. Of course in two years time all her

girlfriends had got bosoms of their own-

"Wait."

The female had halted, its body suddenly besieged by nervous tics.

"What's wrong?" Tammy said.

The woman governed her little spasms and stood still, listening. Then

pointed, off to her right, and having pointed she quickly bounded away, dragging

Tammy after her.

As they fled-and that's what it was suddenly, fleeing-Tammy glanced

back

over her shoulder. They were not taking this journey unaccompanied. There was a

contingent of freaks coming after them, though they were keeping their distance. But

it was not the freaks, however, that the female was so afraid of; it was something

else.

"What?" Tammy gasped. "What?"

"Peacock," the woman replied. She didn't speak again. She simply let go of

Tammy's arm and threw herself into the cover of the thicket. Tammy turned, and

turned again, looking for the creature that had caused this unalloyed panic. For a

moment, she saw nothing; and all she heard was the sound of the female racing off

though the thicket.

Then, almost total silence. Nothing moved, in any direction. And all she

could hear was a jet, high, high above her.

She looked up. Yes, there it was, crawling across the pristine blue, leaving

a trail of vapor tinted amber by the setting sun. She was momentarily enchanted;

removed from her hunger and her aching bones.

"Beautiful," she murmured to herself.

The next moment something broke cover not more than ten yards from her.

This time Tammy didn't stand there mesmerized, as she had at the cages. She

threw herself out of the path of the shape that was barreling towards her. It was

the bizarrest of the all the freaks she'd encountered. Like all its kin it had some

of her own species in its genes but the animal it was crossed with-yes, a

peacock-was so utterly unlike a human being that the resulting form defied her

comprehension. It had the torso of a man, and the stick-thin back legs, scaly though

they were, also belonged to a human being. But its neck was serpentine and its head

no larger than a fist. Its eyes were tiny black beads, and between them was a beak

that looked as though it could do some serious damage. Having missed her on the

first assault it now turned around and came at her again, loosing a guttural shriek

as it did so. She stumbled backwards, intending to turn and run, but as she did so

it raised its body up and she saw to her disgust that its underbelly was made exactly

like that of a man, and that it was in a state of considerable arousal. The moment

of distraction cost her dearly. She fell back against a blooming

rhododendron bush,

and lost her footing in a midst of pink-purple blossom. She cursed loudly and

coarsely, grabbing onto whatever she could-blossom, twig, root-to haul herself up.

As she attempted to do so she saw the creature slowly lower its sleek turquoise

head, and one, of its scaly forelimbs-withered remnants of arms and hands-went to

its chin, where it idly scratched at a flea.

Then, while she struggled like an idiot to get back on her feet, the

creature lifted up its backside and spread its glorious tail. By some quirk of

genetics, it had inherited its father's glory intact. The tail opened like God's own

fan, compensating for every other grotesque thing about the beast. It was beautiful,

and the creature knew it. Tammy stopped struggling for a moment, thinking perhaps

she could talk some sense into this thing.

"Look at you," she said.

Was there brain enough in that little skull to understand that it was being

flattered? She frankly doubted it. But the creature was watching her now, its head

cocked to one side. She kept talking, telling it how fine it looked, while

tentatively reaching around to find a branch large enough to carry her weight, so

that she could pull herself to her feet. The creature shook its tail, the feathers

hissing as they rubbed against one another. The iridescent eyes in their turquoise

setting shimmered.

And then, without warning, it was on her. It moved so suddenly she didn't

have a chance to clamber out of its way. She fell back into the blossoms for a

second time, and before she could raise her arms to ward it off, the peacock came

down against her body, trapping her.

She felt its erection against her body, and its wizened hands clawing at her

Page 98

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

breasts. Its beak snapped above her face, threatening her eyes.

For a moment she lay still, afraid of what it would do to her if she

resisted it. But then it began to thrust its hips against her, and a spasm of

revulsion overcame her better judgment. She reached up and caught hold of the

thing's neck, just below the head, her fingers digging deep into its blotchy,

corrugated flesh. Even so, it continued to grind its body against her.

She raised

her other hand to join the first, and started to strangle the thing. Still it pumped

on, as though so stupefied with lust it was indifferent to its own jeopardy. She

pressed hard on its throat, dosing off its windpipe. Its grindings continued

unabated. She pressed harder, and harder still. Then it seemed to reach a point of

no return, and a series of shudders passed through its body. She felt something wet

spurting on her belly, where its rhythms had pushed up the rags of her blouse.

"Oh God.," she said, "You filthy, dirty-"

Its climax over, it belatedly seemed to realize that it couldn't breathe and

started to thrash about. Its claws raked her breasts, which stung like fury, but she

refused to let go of its scrawny throat. If she gave it an inch it would surely kill

her. Her only hope was to dig deep and hold on until the thing lost consciousness.

But it was easier said than done. The bird's orgasm hadn't exhausted its

energies. It thrashed maniacally, beating its stunted wings against the blossoms, so

that a blizzard of pink petals came down upon them like confetti. Tammy kept her

teeth and her hands locked together, while the would-be rapist's panic became a

frenzy. It was making ghastly, guttural noises now, its mottled tongue sticking

straight out of its mouth. Spittle fell on her upturned face, stinging her eyes. She

closed them, and kept on clutching, while the peacock clawed and flapped and

thrashed.

The struggle had already gone on for three or four minutes, and her strength

was giving out. The pain from her scratched breasts was excruciating, and her hands

were numb. But by degrees the bird's rallies lessened. She didn't relax her grip on

it however, suspicious that if she did so, it would recover itself somehow and renew

its attack. She held on to its silken throat while its wings slowed their moronic

flapping. She opened her eyes. The expression on the creature's face suggested that

it was close to death. Its tongue lolled against its lower beak. Its gaze was

unfocused. Most telling of all, its glorious tail had drooped to the dirt.

Still she held on, pressing her thumbs hard against its windpipe until every

last twitch had gone out of it. Only then did she let go; not with both hands, but

with one, and started to pull herself up from beneath the body of the creature. She

felt its semen cold on her belly, and her own blood hot on her breasts. A fresh wave

of repugnance passed through her. But she had survived; that was the point. This

creature had done its worst, and she'd overcome it. Grabbing hold of a branch she

pulled herself to her feet. The peacock hung from her hand, its body sprawled on a

bed of fallen blossoms. A spasmodic rattle passed through its gleaming tail

feathers, but that was the last of it.

She let it go. It dropped to the ground, its head resembling some absurd

little sock puppet that its owner had abandoned in the grass; the rest of its body a

grotesque amalgam of forms.

"I killed you..." Tammy said softly. "You sonofabitch." She lifted her gaze

and surveyed the bushes around her. All this had been witnessed, she knew; the

creatures that shared this beast's grotesque tribe were all out there in the

twilight, watching their battle. She could not see those who were scrutinizing her,

not even the gleam of a tooth or eye, but she knew they must be thinking twice about

attacking her. On the other hand, she was seriously weakened. If they were to launch

such an assault she would be lost; her energies were all but spent.

She looked down at her bosom. Her blouse was in rags and her skin had been

deeply scored by the freak's claws. She touched the wounds. They stung, but the

blood would soon start to clot. She wasn't a bleeder, luckily. But she was going to

need something to clean the wounds if they weren't to become infected-God knows what

kind of shit and dirt the creature had had beneath its claws-which meant finding her

way, as quickly as possible, back to the house: to clean running water and fresh

dressings.

But there was one other matter to deal with before she moved from this

place: a bit of cleaning up that couldn't wait until she had water. She picked up a

fistful of grass, and wiped her belly, removing as best she could the remnants of

the creature's semen. It took more than one fistful to do the job; but when she had

cleaned herself (and then cleaned her hands with a third portion of grass) she left

the body where it lay, and went on her way. She listened, as she went, for the sound

of pursuit: the rustle of leaves, the snapping of twigs. But she heard nothing.

Either the rest of the freakish clan had decided she was too dangerous to pursue,

given that she'd just slaughtered one of their more fearsome members, or else the

game of pursuit no longer amused them and they'd gone back to whatever crimes they

committed in the stinking darkness. Tammy didn't much care.

As long as they left her alone, she thought, they could do what the hell

they liked.

THREE

"Tell me about all the stuff in the guest-house," Todd asked Katya as they

walked. "Where does it all come from?"

"The large tapestry in the living room was made for The Sorrows of

Frederick, which was a terrible picture, but the designs were magnificent. The

castle they made for the banquet scene! You never saw anything so grand in your

life. And all the Egyptian stuff was from Nefertiti."

"You played Nefertiti?"

"No, Theda Bara played Nefertiti, because the front office said she was a

bigger star than I was. I played her handmaiden. I didn't mind that much because in

my mind it was a better role. Theda just vamped her way through her part. Oh Lord,

she was bad! But I got a little chance to act. In the end Nefertiti had my lover

killed because he was in love with me not her, so I threw myself off a boat into the

Nile."

And drowned?"

"I suppose so. Either that or I was eaten by crocodiles." She laughed. "I

don't know. Anyway, I got some of my best reviews for Nefertiti. Somebody said I

could have stepped right out of history..."

The evening was beginning to draw on as they walked, taking the simple and

relatively direct path which Todd had failed to find on his way up. It was the first

night in a long time that Todd hadn't sat at his bedroom window, drinking, brooding

and popping pills.

"What about the bed?" Todd said. "Where did that come from?"

"That was from The Devil's Bride."

"A horror movie?"

"No, it was this strange picture directed by Edgar Kopel. Very shocking for

its time. The bed was supposed to have been owned by the Devil, you see. Carved to

his design. And then the hero, who was played by Ronald Coleman, inherits it, and he

and his bride use it for the bridal bed. But the Devil comes for the bride, and then

all Hell breaks loose."

"What happened in the end?"

"The Devil gets what he wants."

"You?"

"Me."

"I don't think that would work for modern audiences."

"Oh it didn't work in 1923. They stayed away in droves." They walked on for

a while in silence. Finally Katya said: "What's troubling you?"

"I can't make sense of what you're telling me. The pieces don't fit-"

And it frustrates you."

"Yes."

"Maybe it's best you just don't think about it."

"How can I not think about it?" he said. "This place. You. The posters. The

bed. What am I supposed to make of it all?"

"Make whatever pleases you," she said. "Why's it so important that you have

an explanation for everything? I told you: things are different here."

She caught hold of his hand, and they stopped walking. There were insects in

the grass all around them, making music; overhead, the stars were coming out, their

patterns as familiar as the din of cicadas; and tonight, as strange. His doubts were

contagious. The fact that he didn't understand how it was possible this woman could

have lived the life she claimed to have lived spread confusion into every other sign

the world brought him. What was he doing here, in between the music in the grass and

the brightening stars? He suddenly seemed to understand nothing. His face throbbed,

Page 100

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

and his eyes stung.

"It's all right," she said softly. "There's nothing to be afraid of."

"I'm not afraid," he said.

It was the truth, in a way. What he felt was not fear, it was something far

more distressing. He felt lost, cast off from every certainty.

But then he looked at her face, at her perfect face, and he felt a calm come

over him. So what if he was adrift? So were they both. And wasn't it better to be

with her, sharing her gentle madness, than to be alone in this

unforgiving world?

He leaned towards her, and kissed her on the lips. Nothing overtly sexual;

just a tender kiss.

"What was that for?" she asked him, smiling.

"For being here."

"Even though you think I'm a lunatic?"

"I didn't say that."

"No, but you think it. Don't you? You think I'm living in a fantasy land."

"I'm taking your advice," he replied. "I'm making whatever I like of it. And

I like being here, right now, with you. So the rest can go to hell."

"The rest?"

"Out there," he said, waving his arm in the general direction of the city.

"The people who used to run my life."

"To hell with them?"

"To hell with them!"

Katya laughed. "I like that," she said, returning his kiss in the midst of their laughter.

"Where now?" he said.

"Down to the pool?" she replied.

"You know the way?"

"Trust me," she said, kissing him again. This time he didn't let her escape

so lightly, but returned her kiss with some force. His hand slipped up into her hair

and made a cradle for her head. She put her arms around his waist, pressing so hard

against him it was as though she wanted to climb inside his skin.

When they broke the kiss they gazed at one another for a little time.

"I thought we were going walking," he said.

"So we were," she said, taking his hand again. "The pool, yes?"

"Do you want to go back to the house?"

"Plenty of time for that later," she said. "Let's go down to the pool while

there's still some light."

So they continued their descent, hand in hand. They said nothing now. There

was no need.

Across the other side of the Canyon, a lone coyote began to yap; his voice

was answered by another higher up on the ridge behind them, then another two in the

same vicinity, and now another, and another, until the entire Canyon was filled with

their glorious din.

When Todd and Katya reached the lawn there was a small, scrawny coyote

loping across it, giving them a guilty backward glance as he disappeared into the

undergrowth. As he vanished from sight, the pack ceased its din. There were a few

moments of silence. Then the insects took up their music again.

"It's sad, the way things have declined." Katya said, looking at the sight

before them. The starlight was forgiving, but it couldn't conceal the general

condition of the place: the statues missing limbs, or toppled over and buried in

vines; the pavement around the pool cracked and mossy, the pool itself stained and

stinking.

"What's that?" Todd said, pointing out the one-story mock-classical structure half-hidden by the cypresses around the pool.

"That's the Pool House. I haven't been in there in a very long time."

"I want to see it."

It was a larger building than it had appeared from the front, and uncannily

bright. There were several skylights in the ceiling, which ushered in the brightness

of moon and stars, their light bouncing off" the silky marble floor. In the centre

stood a cocktail bar with mirrors of marbled glass behind the glass shelves. After

all these years there were dozens of bottles on the shelves-brandies,

whiskies and

liqueurs. "You used the pool a lot?" Todd said. "We had the best pool-parties in

Hollywood." Their voices echoed off the glacial walls as they spoke, coming back to

Page 101

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

meet them. "And the people who came here, knew..." Katya said. "They knew." Letting

the thought go unfinished, she moved past him to the bar.

"What did they know?" he said.

"Not to make any judgments," she replied. She slipped behind the bar, and

began to survey the rows of bottles.

"I don't think we should try drinking any of that stuff," he said. "I've got

fresh booze in the house if that's what you want."

She didn't reply; simply continued to survey the selection. Finally she

decided upon one of the brandies, and taking the bottle by the neck she pulled it

forward. There was a grinding noise from behind the mirror as some antiquated

mechanism was activated. Then the mirror slid sideways three or four feet, revealing

a small safe.

Todd was intrigued. He hopped over the bar to get a better look at

what

Katya was up to. She was working on the tumble lock; he could hear a faint clicking

as she flipped it back and forth.

"What's in there?" he said.

"We used to have a book-

"We?"

"Zeffer and I. We just kept it for fun."

"A book of what?"

"Of party pieces." she said, with a little smile. "Who did what to whom. And

how many times."

"You're kidding!"

She turned the lock one more time, and then pushed down on the handle and

pulled the door. There was a cracking sound, as the decayed rubber seal broke. Then

the door swung wide.

"Are there any candles?" she said to him. "Look in the cupboard there between the columns, will you?"

Todd did as he was instructed, and found several boxes of plain white candles on the shelves. One was open, and the heat of many summers had turned the

contents into a single box-shaped slab of white wax. But the contents of the other

two boxes were in better condition: under the first layer, which was partially

melted, there were salvageable candles. He set up six of them on the bar, seating

them in their own dribblings so that they wouldn't fall over.

Their flickering yellow light flattered the marble interior; and by some strange arrangement of the walls it seemed he heard the whispering of the flames

multiplied. Indeed they almost sounded like voices; uncannily so. He looked around,

half-expecting to see somebody flitting between the columns.

"Ah, voil!" said Katya, reaching into the depths of the safe.

She brought a small, thick book out of the little safe along with a sheaf of

photographs and set them all down on the bar in the light from the candles. The book

looked like a journal, bound in dark red leather. When she opened it he saw that its

handwritten contents were arranged symmetrically; two columns to each page.

"Take a look," she said, obviously delighted with her find.

He picked up the book and flicked through it. Almost three-quarters of its

pages were written on, sometimes in the two-column configuration, sometimes simply

filled up from top to bottom. He turned to a page of the former variety. On the left

hand side of the pages was a column of names; on the right hand, a column that was

far harder to make sense of. Occasionally there were names, but more often letters

and symbols, some of them resembling obscure mathematical equations. His puzzlement

amused her.

"Think of it as a history book," she said, offering a teasing smile along with the clue.

"A history of what?"

"Of better times."

Todd flipped through the pages. Now and again, amongst the names, he came

upon some he knew: Norma Talmadge, Theda Bara, John Gilbert, Clara Bow; all movie

stars of another era.

"You knew all these people?" he said to her.

"Yes, of course. This was the place to come, when you wanted to have some

fun. Every weekend, we'd have parties. Sometimes in the pool. Sometimes in the

house. Sometimes we'd have hunts, all through the Canyon."

"Animal hunts?"

"No. People hunts. People treated like animals. We whipped them and we

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

chained them up and...well, you can imagine."

"I'm beginning to. Wow. You had Charlie Chaplin up here, I see."

"Yes, he came up here often. He used to bring his little girls."

"Little girls?"

"He liked them young."

Todd raised a quizzical eyebrow. "And you didn't mind?"

"I don't believe in Thou Shall Not. That's for people who are afraid to follow their own instincts. Of course when you're out there in the world you've got

to play by the rules, or you'll spend your life behind bars. They'd lock you up and

throw away the key. But this isn't the world. This is my Canyon. They called it

Coldheart Canyon, because they said I have a soul like ice. But why should I care

what people say? Let them say whatever they want to say, as long as their money pays

for the little luxuries in life. I want my Kingdom to be a place where people could

take their pleasures freely, without judgment or punishment.

"This is Eden, you see? Only there's no snake. No angel to drive you out

either, because you did a bad thing. Why? Because there were no bad things."

"Literally none?"

She looked at him, her stare luminous. "Oh you mean murder, perhaps? We had

one or two murderers here. And we had sisters who'd fucked their brothers, and sons

who fucked their mothers, and a man who liked having children suck him off."

"What?"

"Ha! Now you're shocked. His name was Laurence Skimpell, and he was as

handsome a man as I've ever met. He had a contract at Warner Brothers, and they were

going to make him a star. A big star. Then this woman turns up at the studios with a

child, who she said was Skimpell's. Warner Brothers have always been very loyal.

They offered the woman money; said they'd put the child up for adoption. But as she

got up and left she said: you don't understand, this isn't his offspring. This is

his lover."

"Oh Jesus Christ."

"That was the last we ever heard of Laurence Skimpell."

"That's a ridiculous story. I don't believe a word of it."

She laughed, as though perhaps this time she was inventing a little. "You're

in here," he said, coming to some mentions of Katya Lupi. "And there's a long list

of Men..."

"Oh that was a competition we had."

"You had all these men?"

"It was my canyon. It still is. I can do what I like here."

"So you let people do what they wanted?"

"More or less." She returned to the book. "You see the symbols beside the

names?"

Todd nodded, somewhat tentatively. The conversation had taken a turn he was

by no means certain he liked. It was one thing to talk about freedom in Coldheart

Canyon; it was another to have her boasting about babies sucking dicks. "All the

symbols mean something different," she said. "Look here. That squiggle there, that

means snakes. That knotted rope? That means being bound up. The more knots in the

rope the more bound the person likes to be. So...here...Barrymore...his rope has six

knots in it. So he liked to be very well tied up. And then there's a little flame

beside him. That means-"

"He liked to be burned?"

"When he was sober. In the end, I stopped inviting him because he got so

drunk and so abusive he wasn't any fun."

"Ah! So you did make a judgment."

She considered this for a moment. "Yes. I suppose I did."

"Did he spoil the secret? Once you didn't invite him anymore. Did he start

telling everyone about what it was like up here?"

"Of course not. What was he going to say? Even he had a reputation to keep.

Besides, half of Hollywood swam in that pool at one time or another. And the other

half wished they could. Nobody said anything but everybody knew."

"What...exactly. That there were orgies here. That women got fucked with

snakes?"

"All of that yes. But mostly that people came back from Coldheart Canyon

spiritually changed."

"You mean that? Spiritually."

Page 103

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"Yes. Spiritually. Don't look so surprised. The flesh and the soul are tied

together."

Todd looked confused.

"Louise Brooks said to me once: there's nothing they can give that

would be

worth my freedom. She parried with the rest of us, but in the end she gave it all

up, and moved away. She said they were trying to take her soul by boring her to

death."

"So she gave up making movies?"

"Indeed she did. But Louise was a rare example. You know what usually

happens: you get addicted. And the studio knows you're addicted. You need your hit

of fame every couple of years or you start to feel worthless. Isn't that right? So

as long as they can keep giving you a little time in the spotlight, they've got you

in their pocket."

Todd continued to flip through the book as Katya spoke, as much because he

didn't want to meet her gaze as because he was interested in the pages. All that she

said was true; and it hurt to hear it: especially when he had done himself so much

harm because of his appetite for the spotlight.

A sound, behind him. He looked up at the mirror behind the bar. It wasn't

his wounded face that caught his eye, however, it was a motion of something, or

somebody, passing by the door.

"I think there's somebody out there," he whispered.

Katya looked unsurprised. "Of course. They know we're here." She took the

book from his hand and closed it for him. "Let me introduce you to them," she said.

"Wait." He reached for the photographs that Katya had also brought out of

the safe. They still lay where she had put them, on the top of the bar.

"You don't need to look at those now," Katya said.

"I just want to take a peek."

He began to flick through the sheaf of photographs. There were probably

forty or so; most in worse condition than the book, the prints made hastily, and

poorly fixed, so that large parts of the image had faded to speckled sepia or to

black. But there were still sizeable portions of many of the photographs visible,

and the scenes they depicted confirmed every obscene or outlandish detail she'd

offered. They weren't simply images of men and women coupling, but pictures of the

most extreme forms of sexual gratification. In one, a naked man was bound to a metal

chain, the cords that held him biting deep into his flesh. A woman wearing just a

black brassiere was flogging his chest and his groin. Assuming this wasn't a set-up

(and something about the quality of all the photographs suggested that all of these

were the real thing), then the woman was doing her victim some serious hurt. There

was blood running down his chest and stomach from blows she'd delivered there; and

there appeared to be welts on his thighs and his dick, which stood testament to the

pleasure he was taking in this. In another picture, some way down the pile, the same

man (his face seemed vaguely familiar to Todd, though he couldn't put a name to it)

had been redeemed from his bondage and lay on the paving stone beside the pool while

another woman (this second completely naked) squatted over him and loosed a stream

of urine on his wounds. To judge by the expression on the masochist's face, this

hurt more than the whipping. His teeth were gritted, his body locked, as though he

were only just holding back an unmanly scream.

"Wait. I know who that is." Todd said, "That's-Christ! It can't be."

"It is."

"He was always the Good Guy."

"Well, sometimes Good Guys like getting pissed on."

And her? She was always so sweet in her movies. What's her name?
Always the

victim."

"Well, that was part of the game you got to play in the Canyon. Up
here you

do the things the studios wouldn't let you do. Rub your face in the dirt
for a

while. And then on Monday morning you could brush your teeth and
smile and pretend

you were all-American again. That's all people want. An illusion. You
can do what

the hell you like out of sight. Just don't spoil their dreams. They want
to believe

you're perfect. And it's hard to put on a perfect face every day without
going

crazy. Up here, nobody was perfect, and nobody cared."

"Jesus," Todd said, coming across a picture of scatology. "Who's the
pooper?" Katya turned the picture round to get a dearer view of the
woman's face.

Page 104

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"That was Edith Vine. At least that was her real name. I can't
remember what they

called her. She had a seven year contract with RKO, but they never
made a star out

of her."

"Maybe they were afraid one of these would leak out and they'd lose

their

investment."

"No, she just kept getting pregnant. She was one of those women who just had

to look at a man and bam, she was eating anchovies and ice cream. So she kept

getting abortions. Two, three a year. And her body went to hell."

"Where did she end up?"

"Oh she's here," Katya said. "We don't just take the famous up here in the

Canyon. We take the failures, too."

Without fully understanding what he'd just been told-perhaps not entirely

wanting to-Todd moved on to another picture. A man who'd played cowboys most of his

life was the centre of attention, all laced up in a girdle that made his waist as

narrow as any showgirl's.

"That's one for the family album."

"He liked to be called Martha when he was dressed like that. It was his mother's name. In fact, I think it was his mother's corset."

Todd laughed, though he wasn't sure where the laughter was coming from.

Perhaps it was simply that the parade of perversions was so excessive there was

nothing to do, in the end, but laugh.

"Christ. What's that?"

ìA jar of bees, and Claudette's breast."

"She liked to get stung?"

"She would scream like her lungs were going to give out. But then she'd have

somebody pick the stings out with their teeth."

"Fuck."

ìAnd she'd be so wet you could fill a shot-glass from what came out of her."

It was too much. He put the photographs down. Bees, piss, corsets. And they

were only the pictures he could make sense of. There were plenty more that defied

easy comprehension; arrangements of limbs and faces and artifacts which he had no

appetite to interpret.

Before he left them where they lay there was one question remaining that he

simply had to ask.

ìAre you in any of these?"

"Well I'm in the book aren't I?"

"So all that stuff you were telling me in the Gaming Room, about offering

yourself to the winner? All that was true?"

ìAll that was true."

"Just how far did you go?"

She turned the photographs over, putting their excesses out of sight.

"As far as you want," she said, smiling. "Then just a little further."

She unnerved him, and she knew it. She took hold of his hand. "Come on," she

said, "Let's go outside. We're missing the dusk."

FOUR

They were too late. It had been twilight when they'd entered the Pool House.

Now it was night. But that wasn't the only change that had taken place in the time

they'd lingered there. The air Todd breathed when he stepped outside again was

something more than a little colder, a little darker, than it had been. Though there

was no wind (at least the trees weren't moving) still he felt movement around and

against him; a delicate touch on his arm, on his shoulder, something touching the

back of his head. He looked at Katya. There was precious little light out here, but

he could see her face with curious clarity, almost as though it were lit from

within. Her expression was one of considerable pleasure.

"Say hello, Todd..." she told him.

"Who to?"

"Oh come on. Stop pretending to yourself. You know they're here."

There was something brushing his cheek, lightly. He flicked it away,
as

though it might be a moth, though he knew it wasn't.

"I don't understand what's going on," he said, his words a kind of plea.

He'd thought earlier that he could do without answers; that having her
here was

enough. Now he was discomfited again; he wanted some explanations
for these

Page 105

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

mysteries, which multiplied every time he turned round. First Katya
and her stories

of the Gaming Room, then the guesthouse and the life-masks and the
posters, then the

bath, and the Terror. Now this: the Pool House and its history of
debaucheries,

locked away for posterity; and as if all that weren't enough, they'd
stepped out

into these moth-wing touches against his cheek, his arm, his groin. He
wanted to

know what it all meant; but he was afraid of the answer. No, that
wasn't it. He was

afraid he already knew the answer.

"You don't need me to tell you what's going on here," Katya said,
echoing

his thoughts. "You can feel them, can't you?"

Oh God, yes, he could feel them. These weren't moths or mosquitoes around

him. They were people. People, hidden in the air. "Say it."

"Ghosts."

"Yes. Of course. Ghosts."

"Oh, Jesus."

"The Canyon's full of ghosts."

"I don't believe in ghosts."

"You don't have to believe," she said, "It's nothing to do with believing or

not believing. They're here. All around you. Just let yourself see them. You know

they're here."

Of course he knew. In his gut, he'd known all along there was some mystery

like this waiting in the wings. And what Katya said about belief was right. Whether

he believed in the Life Everlasting or not was a grand irrelevance. The dead were

here. He could feel their fingers, their breaths, their stares. And now, as they

pressed closer, he began to see them. He had to work up some spit before he could

speak again.

"Why can I see you and I'm only now seeing them?" he asked. "Because I'm not

dead, Todd. And if you're very good, in a little while I'll show you why. You're

going to like it too. My special room-"

At the mention of the room, the air, or rather those who moved invisibly

through it, became agitated. The number of touches that Todd felt doubled, tripled.

Apparently Katya felt them too, and she was somewhat irritated by them.

"Calm down, calm down," she said.

There were subtle smears of light in front of Todd, as though the emotion

the ghosts were feeling-spurred by Katya's mention of the room-was causing them to

show themselves. He thought he saw a face in one of the smears, or some part of a

face: a row of perfect teeth; the gleam of a bright blue eye. The more he thought he

saw, the more there was to support his suspicion. The smears grew more cogent,

painting the forms of faces and shoulders and hands. They lasted only a little

time-like fireworks, bursting into glorious life then dying away-but each time one

was ignited its life lasted a little longer, and the form it etched in the darkness

made more sense to him.

There were people everywhere around him. Not just a few. Dozens of

them; the

ghosts of parties past, lining up to touch the living.

"You begin to see them, don't you?" Katya said.

"Yes," he replied breathlessly. "I do...begin...to see them."

"Pretty people."

More than pretty. Beautiful; and in many cases famous. One woman-
was it Jean

Harlow?-wandered in front of him with her glittering dress torn away
to expose her

breasts. She was come and gone so quickly it was hard for Todd to be
sure, but she

seemed to have bite-marks on her flesh, clustered around her nipples.
She'd no

sooner passed from sight than two figures, tied together with ropes that went from

neck to neck, came into view. Both were male. Both were naked. Both shone with a

mixture of sweat and blood. This would have been distressing enough; but it was

their smiles, their lunatic smiles, which made Todd flinch.

"Sal and Jimmy," Katya said. "They fool around like that all the time. It's

a little lynching game."

He pulled his hand out of hers. "This is too much."

"It's all right," she said. "There's nothing to be afraid of."

He waved them away, like a child trying to ward off nightmares. "I don't

want to see them."

Laughter came out of the darkness to meet his demand. The ghosts were

apparently much amused. Their laughing made faces blossom all round him. Several he

could name: famous beauties, returned to their perfection this bizarre after-life,

as though they'd remembered themselves as their public would have willed them to be.

Page 106

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

Merle Oberon and George Sanders, Mary Pickford and Veronica Lake.

Todd started to retreat up the lawn, still waving them off. The phantoms

came in giddy pursuit.

"All right, enough!" Katya yelled at them. "I said enough!" Her word was

apparently law, even in such stellar company as this. The laughter rapidly subsided,

and the divine faces stopped pressing toward him.

He took the moment to hasten his retreat, turning his back on the assembly

and hurrying back in what he hoped was the general direction of the house. His

thoughts were in chaos. It seemed at that moment that his life since Burrows had

been one long downward spiral into a kind of insanity.

"Wait, love!" Katya had come after him, her voice as pliant as ever. She

caught up with him.

"I'm losing my mind," he murmured. His hands went to his face, pressing his

fingers into his tender flesh, as though the pain might help drag him back from the

brink.

"You're not crazy, you're just seeing things clearly for the first time."

"Well I don't want to see them."

"Why not? Isn't it reassuring to know that death means nothing? That there's

life after death? Pleasure after death."

"Pleasure. You call that-" He glanced back at the Pool House, where he'd

seen the excesses of so many of these people, recorded for posterity.

"We had no shame then. We have even less now."

As if to prove Katya's point there was an eruption of libidinous laughter

from somewhere nearby, and Todd followed the sound to see a woman tied up in the

trees, naked but for a long string of pearls which ran like converging rivulets

between her breasts. Her wrists were bound together, and her arms lifted high above

her head, so that she hung, her pale body shaped like a bow, her toes grazing the

ground. It was she who was laughing, despite the apparent vulnerability of her

situation. There was a man on the ground between her legs, licking the base of her

feet, while another, standing behind her and massaging her breasts, bit into the

tender flesh of her shoulder and neck. The hands went from her breasts down to her

groin, and parted her lips of her pussy, from which came a shimmering arc, raining

down onto the man adoring at her feet.

The recipient began to masturbate, obviously moved to fever-pitch by the

shower.

Aware of Katya's gaze, Todd glanced over at her.

"Would you like to fuck her?" she said.

The girl was beautiful, with long red hair and that frothy laugh of hers,

which sounded so very much more innocent than what she was up to.

"She's yours if you want her. Ava!"

The girl looked up.

"This is Todd," Katya said.

"Hello, Todd."

"Go on," Katya said. Don't worry: I'm not going to get jealous. I'd like to

see how you give pleasure to a woman."

Despite the hint of judgment in this remark, Todd might have taken the

opportunity to have the woman if the man at Ava's feet hadn't suddenly began to

moan, and raising his hips off the ground ejected a copious load of semen. The sight

of this eruption was enough to keep Todd at bay.

"Another time," he said to Ava, moving away.

She called after him, but he didn't look back.

"There's plenty more where she came from," Katya said, catching up with him.

Her hand casually brushed the front of his pants, as though to make

the point that

she knew he was aroused. "You should go to one of them," she said.

"Why?"

"Just to see what it's like..."

"Fucking a ghost?"

"If you want to put it that way."

"I don't know. It's weird. I'm not sure-"

Her hand went back to his hard-on. "Yes you are. You love the idea."

Her hand went from his groin to his wrist, which she caught hold of, drawing

him away from Ava into a kind of bower lined with honeysuckle and night-blooming

jasmine, their mingled perfumes so strong they were practically intoxicating. It was

darker here than it had been under the trees where Ava hung, but Todd could see

Page 107

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

bodies on the ground, in various combinations of coupling. Somebody reached down

from a branch overhead, and ran his or her fingers through Todd's hair; someone else

came up behind him and pulled his shirt out from his trousers. Again, he looked for

Katya; and again found her close by, smiling.

"Katya?"

A girl's voice, off to the right, and Todd saw a naked young woman being

carried towards Katya on the shoulders of three men, one at her head, the other two

supporting her knees, in such a way as to hold her legs wide open. Even in the dim

light Todd could see what a gloriously tender sight the girl presented. She had been

shaved between her legs, making her look even younger than she was, which was surely

less than twenty.

"Lick me, Katya," she said, her voice dreamy. "Will you please? Nobody does

it to me like you. Lick me deep."

Katya glanced round at Todd.

"Do you mind?"

"Help yourself," he replied, as though the girl was a plate set before her.

Katya smiled, her hands going up to the insides of the girl's thighs, venturing up to the spot where they met but then before they quite reached the place

and offered any satisfaction, retreated again. It was a tantalizing game, and it

drove the girl crazy with anticipation.

"Oh please," she said. "Please, Katya, please."

Todd stepped a little to the side so as to have a better view of what was

unfolding here. Katya had very quickly bared her breasts, so that now, as she

approached the divide of the girl's legs, her nipples stroked her partner's thighs.

Her hands were delicately parting the girl's labia, as though investigating the most

exquisite of flowers.

Todd could feel the blood thumping at his groin. Was there no end to Katya's

capacity to surprise him? Whenever he thought he was beginning to get a grasp of the

woman, she changed the rules in some subtle fashion and found a new way to astonish

him. Was this really the same woman he'd discovered in bed a while ago, looking like

a disheveled angel?

Katya glanced back at him one last time-just to be sure that he was indeed

watching her-then she applied her mouth to the girl's flesh.

The recipient of this tonguing let out a long, contented sigh, stretching

out on her bed of hands, opening her legs a little wider. Katya proceeded to press

deeper into her, advancing with lickings and nibblings, occasionally seeming to

murmur against the woman's sex. The girl was no longer relaxed. She had grabbed

fistfuls of the hair of the men who supported her knees, pulling herself up almost

into a sitting position one moment then falling back, her body convulsed with little

shudders, her tiny nipples hard, her flat belly shiny with sweat.

Katya slowly escalated the sensations she was inducing in the woman's body

until her victim (there was no other word for it) was thrashing and sobbing beneath

the tiniest of touches.

Somewhere in the midst of this, another occupant of the bower, on her knees

in the shadows beneath the spread-eagled girl, came forward and freed Todd's

erection from his pants. He didn't attempt to dissuade her. The girl took him into

her throat and kept him there. The mingling of the sight of Katya working on the

girl, and this new sensation was almost too much for him. He had to gently ease

himself out of the girl's mouth so as not to lose control too quickly.

She seemed to get the message because she crawled away, beckoning him to

follow. He pulled off his shoes and socks, and then hauled down his trousers,

stepping out of them as he followed. He doubted Katya had noticed what he was up to:

she was too deeply engaged in driving her partner to distraction: the

girl's sobs of

pleasure were the loudest sound in the vicinity.

At ground level, beneath the spread shadow of the ecstatic girl, was a sub-world of shadowy bodies, touches and whispers. There were probably a dozen men

and women down here, variously intertwined. Todd felt their hands at his backside,

his face, his erection; heard an appreciative coo from someone who weighed the mass

of his balls (a man's palm there, surely; but he was past caring); and the girl

who'd beckoned to him grazing his lips with hers, saying something he couldn't

catch.

He lost sight of her for a little while, then he heard her ahead of him,

gasping with delight. Somebody had got their hands on her before him. He felt a

spasm of possessiveness, and crawled on, over a couple of sweating bodies, to catch

Page 108

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

up with her. He'd got it into his head that the nameless girl was his for the

having, and he wasn't about to be denied her.

She wasn't hard to find. In fact she found him: catching hold of his hand

and drawing him towards her. The shadow of Katya's sobbing victim spilled across

much of her body, but her face lay clear of it, and Todd saw that this girl who'd

gobbled him down so gluttonously looked barely old enough to be out of her parent's

charge. She was dark: dark skin, dark hair, dark eyes. And she was already lying

back on a bed of bodies. She pulled him eagerly towards her and cupped his face with

her hands, bringing his mouth to hers. There was some confusion of bodies around and

beneath her, but he was too turned on to pay much attention to such details. He

kissed the girl (wondering, indeed half-hoping, that Katya had paused in her

ministrations to see what he was up to; wishing she'd feel just a little pang of

jealousy), and the girl returned his kiss, lavishly.

Was there something in her kiss-some subtle tang to the juices of her mouth,

some coldness to her lips-which would have given away the fact that she was a

spirit? Not that he could tell. If anything she was hotter than most women he'd been

naked with; almost feverish. And despite the fact that his eyes had for so long

failed to see the ghosts in the Canyon, she-and all of those around him-now seemed

absolutely solid.

His dick had lost none of its rigidity through this fumbling pursuit; the fact that the air was humid and pungent with the heat given off these spirit-forms

only aroused him more. Katya had prepared him well, with her talk of shamelessness.

He wanted the girl, and she wanted him: what else mattered?

He put the head of his cock into her. She lifted her legs a little, to help him. There was undoubtedly somebody else beneath her, but he or she didn't seem to

care that he was kneeling on them.

"All the way," she insisted.

He slid into her, as she instructed, all the way to the root, and began to

work his hips against her.

Her cunt was as agile as her throat; he felt a counter-rhythm moving beneath

his dick, passing through the lower half of her vulva. The sensation was like

nothing he'd ever experienced before; after just a few strokes he was brought to the

edge. He slowly pulled out of her, to be sure he didn't ejaculate too quickly.

"You like that?" she said, putting her hand down between her legs, and guiding him back in.

"Yes. I like it a lot."

"Good."

"But go slowly. Please."

He let her take him inside again and she threw back her head, expelling a

sigh of satisfaction.

"Go on." she said, her eyes fluttering closed. "All the way. Both of you."

Both? he thought, raising his head from her breast.

And as he formed the question he felt an arm, twice, three times as thick as

hers, and deeply muscled, reach over and grab his neck.

He lifted his head as best he could, and saw the face of a man over the girl's shoulder. She was apparently lying on him, her back against his chest. He was

black, and handsome, even in the shadows.

"She's good," he said, smiling. "Yeah?"

Tentatively Todd reached down into the moist muddle between their legs. He

felt himself, hard as ever; and then, further back, buried in the girl's ass, the

other man's dick. So that was what he had been feeling as he moved inside her. It

wasn't a muscular contraction; it was the black man sliding in and out of her. In

any other situation he would have been repulsed; would have pulled out and

retreated. But this was the Canyon; Katya's Eden without the serpent.
The part of

him that would have been revolted had been sweated out of him. It
only made him

harder thinking about the woman being sandwiched between him and
the other man; the

fine sheath of her muscle dividing the two of them. He brought his
hand up from the

swamp between their legs and grabbed hold of the black man's wrist,
tightening the

three-way knot.

The man laughed.

"You like that?" he said.

"I like that."

"Good," he said, licking the girl's neck, but keeping his eyes fixed
hungrily on Todd. "Cause we like to get real crazy."

Page 109

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

Todd had found the rhythm of this now; and together they played her
until

she started to scream with ecstasy.

Somewhere in the midst of this, the girl Katya was pleasuring began to
utter

gut-wrenching cries. A little time later Katya must have had mercy on
her, and

allowed her to be carried off, because when Todd was next getting

close to coming

(for the fifth or sixth time) he looked away from the blissed-out faces beneath him,

and saw Katya sitting amongst the jasmine and the honeysuckle, with a young man

lying naked at her feet, covering them with reverential kisses.

She was watching Todd, her expression inscrutable. Somebody lit a cigarette

for her. Todd smiled at her, and then-before she could choose either to return the

smile or ignore it-he fell back into the bliss of his mÈnage-ý-trois, thinking that

if this was what sex with the dead was like, then the living had a lot to learn.

FIVE

Tonight was one of those nights when Marco had decided to get drunk. An

èhonourable occupationí, as his father had always said. He didn't like to drink in

company; in truth, he didn't much like company. People in this town were full of

bullshit (his boss included, half the time) and Marco didn't want to hear it. He'd

come out to Los Angeles after his career in professional wrestling had come to a

premature conclusion, half-thinking he might have a crack at acting. Then someone

had suggested that personal security might be a good job for a man

like himself,

since he not only looked intimidating, but had the moves to back up his appearance.

So Marco had joined an agency, and after working for a succession of spoiled-brat

movie-stars who treated him as though he was something they'd just found on their

shoe, he was ready to head for home. Then, within days of his planned departure, the

job with Todd Pickett had come along.

It turned out to be a perfect match. He and Todd hit it off from the start.

They had the same taste in girls, cars and whisky, which was more or less the

contents of Marco's fantasy world.

Tonight, he wanted a girl, and was tempted to go out, hit the clubs on the

Strip, see if he got lucky. If not there was always the credit card: he had no

qualms about paying for sex. It certainly beat the five-fingered widow.

But before he went out he always liked to get mellow with a whisky or two:

it made him more sociable. Besides, there was something strange about the house

tonight, though he didn't know what. Earlier on, he'd been tempted to go out and

take a look around, just to be sure they didn't have any intruders, but by now the

whisky had got him feeling too lazy to be bothered. Fuck it, they should get another

dog. Dempsey had been a great early warning system. As soon as anyone came anywhere

near the house he'd go crazy. Tomorrow, Marco thought as he headed down from his

bedroom to get a fresh bottle of whisky, he'd talk to Todd again about buying a pup,

using the security angle to get past Todd's loyalty to Dempsey.

He found the whisky, and poured himself a glass, taking it neat in one

swallow. Then he looked at his watch. It was eleven-twenty. He'd better get moving.

Los Angeles was an early town, he'd discovered, especially mid-week. If he didn't

hurry he'd be too late to catch any of the action.

He started back upstairs to fetch his wallet, but halfway up he heard a

noise at the bottom of the stairwell. It sounded like a door opening and closing.

"Boss?" he yelled down. "Is that you?"

There was no reply. Just the door, continuing to open and close, though

there was no wind tonight to catch it.

"Huh," he said to himself. He went up, found his wallet, picked up his

whisky glass from the kitchen on the way back down, and descended the stairs.

There were plenty of places around the house he hadn't explored: one of them

was the very lowest level of the house, which Jerry had told him were just

store-rooms. Nor had he advised using them. They were damp and anything put down

there would be mildewed in a month, he said.

A few steps from the bottom of the stairs, Marco emptied his glass, and set

it down. He was now drunk, he realized as he stood upright. Not paralytically; just

nicely, pleasantly toasted. Smiling a little smile of self-congratulation for having

achieved this blissful state, he continued down.

It was cold here, in the bowels of the house. But it wasn't the damp cold

that Jerry had warned him about. This was an almost-bracing cold: like a late autumn

night in his home town of Chicago. He went down the little corridor that led from

Page 110

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

the bottom of the stairs, at the end of which was the noisy door which had brought

him down here. What the hell was making it open and close that way?

He felt the answer on his face the closer he got to the door. There was a

wind blowing down here, unlikely as that seemed and it smelled not of small,

mildewed rooms, but of wide green spaces.

For the second time in this journey, Marco said: "Huh."

He pushed open the door. There was complete darkness on the other side, but

it was a high, wide darkness, his gut told him; and the wind that gusted against him

came-though this was beyond reason-across a stretch of open land.

He wished he hadn't drunk the whiskies now. Wished he had his senses

completely under his control, so that he could assess this phenomenon clearly.

He put his hand around the corner of the door, looking for a light switch.

There wasn't one; or at least there wasn't one his fingers could find. Never mind.

This would be a mystery for tomorrow. For now he'd just close the door and go back

to his drinking.

He reached in and caught hold of the doorhandle. As he clasped it there was

a flicker of light in the depths of the room. No, not of light, of lightning: a

fragmentary flicker which was followed by three much longer flashes, in such quick

succession they were almost a single flash.

By it, he saw the space from which the wind came, and had his instincts

confirmed. Wide it was, and high. The thunderhead which spat the lightning was miles

away, across a landscape of forest and rock.

"Oh, Jesus." Marco said.

He reached out for the doorhandle, caught hold of it, and slammed the door

closed. There was a lock, but no key. Still, it seemed firmly enough closed, at

least until he'd found Todd, and shown him.

He started yelling Todd's name as he ran up the stairs, but there was no

reply. He went to the master bedroom, knocked, and entered. The room was empty, the

French doors to the balcony open, the drapes billowing.

He went to the balcony. The wind that was moving the drapes was a California

wind: warm, fragrant, gentle. It was not remotely like the wind that had blown

against his face in the room below. That was a wind from a different country.

Todd was not on the balcony. But once Marco was out there he heard the sound

of voices from somewhere in the Canyon. Women's voices, mostly, laughing. And

lights, running between the trees.

"Sonofabitch," Marco said.

The boss was apparently having a party, and he hadn't invited Marco.

The evening was getting stranger by the minute. He went downstairs, through

the kitchen and out to the back door. Anxiety had soured the drink in his stomach,

and as he opened the back door a wave of nausea suddenly overcame him. He had no

time to get outside. He puked on the threshold, the force of the feeling enough to

fold his legs up beneath him.

He gazed weakly down at the splattered whisky and meatballs on the ground,

his eyes vaguely comprehending the intricacy of five nails that were driven into the

partially rotted wood of the threshold.

Then, from the darkness on the other side of the threshold there came a

soft, infinitely sorrowful voice. The voice of a lost girl.

"Let me in," she said.

Marco looked up, his head still spinning. There was more vomit gurgling in

his belly; he could feel his system preparing to revolt again. He tried to make

sense of the girl who just begged entrance to the house, narrowing his eyes to see

if he could separate her from the shadows.

There she was: a young woman with a face that his sickened eyes could not

entirely fix nor be certain of, but who seemed to be more than
passingly pretty. She

had long blonde hair and pale, almost white, skin; and as suited her
tone of

supplication she was on her knees, her pose a mirror image of his
own. She was

wearing what appeared to be a man's shirt, which was unbuttoned.
Had Marco been

feeling more like himself, he might have hoped to persuade her to
take the shirt off

before he took pity on her. But the nausea overwhelmed all other
responses: the

girl's near-nakedness only made his belly churn harder. He looked
away from her,

hoping to postpone the next bout of vomiting until she was out of
sight. She plainly

took his averted eyes as a sign of rejection.

"Please." she said to him again, "I just want to get back into the house.

You have to help me."

Page 111

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"I'm in no condition-" he started, looking up at her to try and
communicate

with the expression just how dire he felt, but the few words he'd
begun to say were

enough to bring about a sudden and calamitous change in her.

She let out a shriek of frustration and rage, volume and shrillness

uncanny.

He felt his gorge rising, and as the woman's din reached its inhuman height, he

puked up what was left of his dinner.

The worst was over now; but there was more to come from the woman outside.

Feeling his stomach settling, he chanced a look up at her. It was an error. She was

still letting out the remnants of that godless shriek of hers, and it seemed-at

least to Marco's sickened and bewildered eyes-that the noise was taking some

grotesque toll on her body. Her face-which had been so beautiful just minutes

before-had become a grey, smeared form: her forehead swollen so that she looked

cretinous, her eyes pulled into empty slits, her mouth running with saliva from its

turned down corners. Her oversized shirt of hers had fallen open to reveal breasts

that were gray scraps of dead flesh, hanging on the cage of her bones. Beneath them,

he seemed to see her innards in frenzied motion, as though she had snakes nesting in

her.

It was too much for Marco's already traumatized senses. He didn't give any

further thought to finding Todd-Christ, Todd was probably part of this

insanity.

With his heels sliding in the mess he'd made, he hauled himself to his feet-half expecting the abomination on the other side of the threshold to come after

him. But for some reason she kept her distance, her transformation now so far

advanced she was completely unrecognizable as the woman he'd first laid eyes on.

He retreated down the passageway-still assuming this nightmare might come

after him. But she matched his retreat with one of her own, melting into the

shadows. Marco wasn't reassured. She'd probably gone to find others; he didn't want

to be here when they came back. He raced into the kitchen and picked up his car

keys, which were on the table. He gave a moment's consideration to the possibility

of lingering to wash his face and hands (maybe even to changing his puke-splattered

shirt), but he decided to forego cleanliness in favour of making a fast exit.

He drove down the serpentine road that led out of the Canyon as if he were

being pursued by a horde of demon-women, and without even thinking about it took the

same route he'd taken with Todd countless times: up onto Mulholland Drive. He opened

the window as he drove, so as to have a sobering breeze blowing against his face,

but it had very little effect. There was too much alcohol in his blood, and too much

panic inflaming that alcohol, to make him a safe driver on such a notoriously tricky

and dangerous stretch of road. He didn't care. He just wanted to put some distance

between himself and that damn Canyon as fast as possible.

On one of the hairpin bends his clammy hands slid on the wheel, and he

momentarily lost control of the car. He was a good enough driver-even in his present

state-to recover quickly, and things might have been fine had another speed-freak

not come barreling round the corner in the opposite direction. The other driver took

quick evasive action, and was away round the bend before Marco lost what little

control he had. The wheel slipped through his hands, and his drink-slurred foot was

too slow on the brake to stop the car from skewing round, squealing loudly. There

was no barrier between the road and the drop; not even a wooden fence. The front

half of the vehicle went over the edge, and there it lodged for a moment, finely

balanced between solid asphalt and oblivion. Marco muttered a little prayer, but God

wasn't listening. The car tripped forward and slid off the road into darkness. It

was a straight drop of perhaps forty or fifty feet.

The vehicle didn't hit solid ground, however. It fell into the massive

boughs of a sycamore tree, which was large enough to hold the car, nose down, in its

branches. Marco was thrown against the windshield. Through it he could see the yard

in which the sycamore stood. There was a party going on down there. The pool was

illuminated: its bright turquoise water twinkling. Lanterns hung in the bushes all

around, swaying in the breeze. Marco had time to grasp the prettiness of all this,

then something ignited in the engine, and the fume-filled air around him became a

sheet of lurid orange flame. It enveloped him completely, the first burst of heat

enough to sear the clothes from his body and set his hair and flesh alight.

Blindly, he fumbled for the handle of the door, and pulled on it. The rush

of air only excited the flames further. Through the stench of gasoline and burning

plastic he could smell the sickening tang of his own body being cooked. Still he

fought to escape, and gravity was on his side. The car was so positioned that he had

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

only to lean forward and fall out through the open door. The
sycamore's boughs

slowed his descent, but once he was clear of them there was an
eighteen foot drop to

the polished Mexican pavers around the pool.

He scarcely felt the impact. The fire had completely traumatized his
nerve-endings. Nor could he see anything: his eyelids had been fused
shut by the

heat. He could still hear, though he wouldn't make much sense of the
garbled cries

of the people who had gathered to witness his agonies.

There was one person in the crowd who was willing to do more than
stand and

watch him burn. Marco felt arms grab hold of him; heard his savior
yelling something

about the pool. Then he was in free-fall again, as the man who'd
picked him up threw

him into the water.

The flames were instantly extinguished. But the cure was too much for
his

flesh to endure. The sudden shock of cold after the blistering heat of
the fire sent

his body into systemic failure.

His last breath-a bubble of heated air-escaped from his cooked lungs.
Then

he sank to the bottom of the pool.

Even so, the people around the pool didn't give up on him. Three of the

partygoers dived into the pool and brought his blackened, fire-withered body up from

the bottom. He was tenderly rifted onto the side of the pool, where one of the girls

attempted to breathe some life back into him. But it was a lost cause. The man who'd

made such a dramatic entrance into the gathering was dead, and beyond hope of

saving.

This was not quite the end of events along that stretch of Mulholland Drive,

however.

Just a few hours later, as the first light of dawn was breaking, a jogger,

who ran a two-mile route along the Drive daily, rain or shine, saw a light on the

road, close to the place where Marco's tires had left their blackened imprint on the

asphalt. Apparently aware that it had an unwanted witness, the mysterious

luminescence rose up into the brightening air and was gone.

The following evening, Paul Booth, the man who'd had the courage to carry

the burning body of Marco Caputo to the pool-went out into the back yard, alone. He

was in a melancholy state of mind. The party he'd thrown the previous night had been

in honour of his little sister's sixteenth birthday. Some celebration! Alice had

barely stopped crying since. He could hear her now, sobbing in the house.

He took out the half-smoked reefer he'd been saving for a happier occasion,

and lit it up. As he drew on the pungent smoke, he looked up and saw a patch of

luminous air lingering at the edge of the pool. It had no discernible shape. It was

simply a gentle brightness, which would have been invisible half an hour before,

when the sun had still been up. He watched the brightness as it hung there for ten,

perhaps fifteen seconds, then he nipped out his reefer, pocketed it, and went back

inside to find someone to tell. He found his father; and together they emerged into

the backyard.

The light had already gone from beside the pool.

"There!" Paul said, pointing up at something that could have been the light

he'd seen, now up on Mulholland Drive. But it could just as easily have been the

light of a car coming round the treacherous corner of the road. And anyway, it had

gone in a heartbeat, leaving both father and son doubting what they'd seen.

SIX

In the depths of the Canyon, no more than half a mile from the pool and the

lawn and the tree where Ava hung, Tammy lay in the dirt, and waited for the end.

She'd done all she could do to survive: she had eaten berries and licked the dew off

leaves, she'd fought off the fever-dreams which threatened to claim her

consciousness; she'd forced herself to walk when she had no strength left in her

limbs.

It had tricks, this canyon: ways to lead you round and round in circles, so

that you burned up all your energies coming back to the place you'd started from. It

put colors before your eyes that were so bewitching that you ended up turning round

and round on the spot to catch them, like a dog chasing its own tail. And sometimes

(this was its cleverest trick) it went into your head and found the voices there

that were most comforting, then made them call to you. Arnie (of all people to find

comforting, Mr. Zero Sperm Count); and the man who used to do her dry-cleaning in

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

Sacramento, Mr. O'Brien, who'd always had a smile and a wink for her; and Todd, of

course, her beautiful hero Todd, calling out to her just to make her stumble a few

more steps. She hadn't quite believed any of these voices were real, but that hadn't

stopped her following them, back and forth, around and about-voices and colors-until

at last she had no strength left in her body, and she fell down.

So now she was down, and she was too weak to get up again; too damn heavy

ever to get her fat ass up and moving. At the back of her head was the fear that the

freaks would come and find her. But they didn't come, at least by daylight. Perhaps,

she thought, they were waiting for darkness. Meanwhile, there were plenty of things

that did come: flies, dragonflies, humming-birds, all flitting around.

As for the summonings from Arnie and Mr. O' Brien and Todd, once she was

down on the ground none of these came either. The Canyon knew it had her beaten. All

it had to do was wait, and she'd perish where she lay.

The day crept on. In the middle of the afternoon she fell into a stupefied

daze, and when she woke experienced a short and surprising burst of renewed ambition

to save herself. After much effort she managed to get to her feet, and started to

walk in what she thought was the direction of the house (sometimes she seemed to see

the roof through the trees, sometimes not), but after ten minutes the Canyon seemed

to realize she was up and walking, and it began its little tricks afresh. The colors

came back. So did the voices.

She fell to her knees, crying, begging it to leave her alone. But it was

merciless; the voices were louder than ever, yelling incoherently in her head; the

sky was every color but blue.

"Okay," she said. "Okay, okay. Just leave me alone to die. I won't get up

again. I promise. I swear. Just leave me be."

It seemed to get the message, because by degrees the yelling receded, and

the colors dimmed.

She lay back in the foliage, and watched the sky darken, the stars emerge.

Birds flew overhead, returning to their nests before the onset of night. She envied

them, just a little, but then what did she have to go home to, in truth? A house in

the suburbs she'd never really loved; a husband, the same. What a mess she'd made of

her life! What a ridiculous, empty mess! All that time wasted doting on a man she'd

seen on a screen; hours spent flicking through her treasures, fantasizing. Never

really living. That was the horror of it. She was going to die and she'd never

really lived.

The sky was almost lightless now. She could barely see her hand in front of

her face. She let her eyes slide closed, draping the stars. In the grass around her,

the cicadas sang a rhythmical lullaby.

Suddenly, somewhere not very far off, there rose an unholy din; part howl,

part yelp, part laughter. Her eyes sprang open. The hairs at her nape stood on end.

Was this a farewell performance by the Canyon? One last attempt to squeeze her wits

dry?

No; no. This wasn't for her benefit. It was too far away. Up at the house.

Yes, that was it; somebody up at the house was having one hell of a party.

Curiosity got the better of her fatigue. Tammy pushed herself up onto her

knees, and attempted to figure out where the cacophony was coming

from. There was

light visible between the trees; flickering, but not flames. This was too cold a

light to be fire.

Perhaps this wasn't a party after all. The din was as nasty as it was

raucous. Who the hell could be making such a noise? The freaks perhaps? It seemed

the likeliest source. She pictured them laying siege to the house. Oh God in Heaven,

suppose they'd gone after Todd? Sniffed him out in his weakened state, and attacked

him?

The thought of harm coming to him was unbearable, even now. It forced her to

get up off the ground, something she couldn't have done on her own behalf. For a few

seconds she stood with legs wide planted, uncertain whether she was going to fall

down again. Then, she told herself to move, and much to her surprise her body obeyed

the instruction. Her legs felt like lead and her head as light as a helium balloon,

but she managed to stagger five or six steps without falling down.

The noise from the house had subsided somewhat, but the lights were still

visible between the trees. She paused for a moment to catch her breath, and while

she did so she studied the lights, trying to make sense of them. Was it possible

what she was seeing were people? Yes it was. Several of the figures had slipped away

Page 114

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

from the immediate vicinity of the house, and were coming closer to her. Some were

zigzagging through the trees, as though they were engaged in a game of some kind.

What sort of creatures were these, she wondered, that capered like children playing,

but had such luminescence about them?

She stumbled on another two or three steps, but her body wasn't going to

carry her much further, she knew. It was only a matter of time before she fell down

again; and next time she knew she wouldn't have the strength to pick herself up.

Then, very close by, she heard the sound of something moving through the

thicket. She looked in the direction of the sound. An animal perhaps? A coyote, or-

"Tammy?"

She held her breath, not quite daring to believe that she recognized the

voice.

"It's Willem," he said.

Her legs almost gave out from sheer gratitude. He came out of the bushes and

caught hold of her before she fell.

"I'm heavy," she warned him.

"I'm strong," he said.

So she let him take her weight, sinking against his chest. As she

relinquished herself to him she heard a little girl somewhere nearby, sobbing

pitifully. She was about to ask who the hell it was making such a noise when she

realized it was her own voice.

"It's all right," Zeffer said. "I'm here now. Everything's going to be fine."

She wasn't sure that she believed him; it sounded like a bad piece of dialogue to her. But this was no time to be judgmental. He'd come to look for her,

and she was grateful. She put her head on his chest, like a B-movie heroine snatched

from the jaws of death, and laughing, then sobbing, then laughing again, let him put

his arms around her, and rock her awhile.

SEVEN

Finally, it had not been Todd who'd lost control, but her other lover.

"I can't...hold back...much longer," he said.

The girl was beyond giving even the most rudimentary instructions:
she lay

in a daze of pleasure, her legs hoisted up by Todd so that he could see
the

wonderful machinery of their interconnected anatomies.

"Are you ready?" the other man said to him. His face was liquid
shadow, his

eyes wild.

"You say the word."

"Lift her legs higher."

Todd did as he was instructed, noticing as he did so that their game
had

brought all the other games in the immediate vicinity to a halt.
Everyone was

watching the spectacle, their gazes ravenous.

The girl's eyes were closed but there was no doubt that she had
achieved,

and was sustaining, some state of sexual Nirvana. There was a
Gioconda smile on her

wet lips, and when on occasion her lids did flutter open, only the
whites of her

eyes were visible.

The girl's other lover had one hand on her face, a thumb pressed
between her

lips, but his other hand was gripping the muscle that ran from Todd's
nape to his

shoulder, gripping it so hard it hurt. Todd was glad of the pain. It was

just enough

to keep him distracted from emptying himself.

The man's eyes opened wide. "Oh yeah!" he bellowed, and Todd came the

closest he'd ever come to feeling another man's orgasm.

The girl opened her eyes, and looked at Todd. "You too," she said.

"No," said another voice.

Todd looked up. It was Katya who had spoken. She was looking at him with an

appreciative smile on her face. Clearly she'd enjoyed watching the mēnage-ý-trois.

But it was clear she now wanted Todd to leave the game.

"Gotta go," he said to the girl.

She put her hand down between their legs, as though to hold him inside.

"Sorry," he said, and pulled out of her.

As he stood up there was a light patter of applause from the vicinity of the

bower.

Page 115

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"Quite the performer." Katya said, as she stood up. She had his pants. He

started to put them on, pressing his dick out of sight.

"You can come back and find them again another night." Katya said, as

she

hooked her arm through Todd's, and escorted him away from the place.

It seemed the scene in the night-blooming jasmine had begun a chain reaction

amongst the ghosts. As they walked through the warm darkness he saw orgiasts on

every side, involved in pleasuring themselves and one another. Clothes had been shed

in the grass or hung in the branches like Hallowe'en spooks; kisses were being

exchanged, murmurs of passion. As he'd already discovered, death had done nothing to

dim the libidos of these people. Though their dust and bones lay in cold tombs and

mausoleums across the city, their spirits were very much in heat here. And, as Katya

had told him, nothing was forbidden. It was only curious to see so many familiar

faces amongst the orgiasts. Faces he associated with everything but this: comedians

and adventurers and players of melodrama. But never naked; never aroused. And again,

as had been true in the bower, what he would have turned away from in revulsion in

the company of the living, intrigued and inflamed him here, amongst the famous dead.

Was that Gary Grant with his trousers around his ankles; and Randolph Scott paying

tribute below? Was that Jean Harlow lying on one of the lower boughs of a tree, with

her foot running up and down the erection of a man standing devotedly by? There were

others, many others, he only half-recognized, or didn't recognize at all. But Katya

supplied names as they wandered back to the house: Gilbert Roland and Carole

Lombard, Frances X. Bushman and Errol Flynn. A dozen times, seeing some coupling in

progress, he wanted to ask, was that so-and-so? Three or four times he did. When the

answer was consistently yes, he gave up asking. As for what was actually going on,

well the pictures in the Pool House had given him a good idea of how wild things

could get, and now he was seeing those excesses proved in the flesh, for just about

every sexual peccadillo was being indulged somewhere in the Canyon tonight. Nor did

Todd discount the possibility that even more extreme configurations than those he

could see were going on in the murk between the trees. Given what he'd ended up

doing after only a short night here, imagine the possibilities an occupant in the

Canyon might invent with an indeterminate number of nights to pass: knowing you were

dead but denied a resting-place?

What new perversions would a soul invent to distract itself from the constant threat of ennui?

At last the crowd of fornicators thinned, and Katya led him-by a path he

hadn't previously seen, it being so overgrown-back to the big house.

"What I am about to show you," she warned him as they went, "will change

your life. Are you ready for that?"

"Is it something to do with why you're here?"

"Why I'm here, why they're here. Why the Canyon is the most sacred place in

this city. Yes. All of the above."

"Then show me," he said. "I'm ready."

She took a tighter hold of his hand. "There's no way back," she warned him.

"I want you to understand that. There is no way back."

He glanced over his shoulder at the party-goers cavorting between the trees.

"I think that was true a long time ago," he said.

"I suppose it was," Katya replied, with a little smile, and led him out of the darkened garden and back into her dream palace.

EIGHT

"I'm hungry," Tammy told Zeffer. "Can't we get some food from the house

before we leave?"

"You really want to find Todd," Zeffer said. "Admit it."

"No, I don't care." She stopped herself in mid-lie. "Well, maybe a little," she said. "I just want to check that he's all right."

"I can tell you the answer to that. He's not all right. He's with her.

Frankly, that means you may as well forget about him. When Katya wants a man Katya

gets him."

"Were you married to her?"

"I was married when I met Katya, but I never became her husband. She never

wanted me. I was just there to serve her, right from the start. To make her life

easier. Todd's a different story. She's going to suck him dry."

"Like a vampire, you mean?" Tammy said. After all she'd seen the idea didn't

Page 116

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

seem so preposterous.

"She's not the kind who takes your blood. She's the kind who takes your

soul."

"But she hasn't got Todd yet, has she?" Tammy said. "I mean, he could still

leave if he wanted to."

"I suppose he could," Zeffer said, his voice laced with doubt. "But,

Tammy,

I have to ask you: why do you care about this man so much? What's he ever done for

you?"

It took Tammy a few moments to muster a reply. "I suppose if you look at it

that way, he hasn't done anything...tangible. He's a movie star, and I'm one of his

fans. But I swear, Willem, if he hadn't been around over the last few years I would

have had nothing to live for."

"You would have had your own life. Your marriage. You're clearly a sensible

woman-"

"I never wanted to be sensible. I never really wanted to be a wife. I mean,

I loved Arnie, I still do I suppose, but it's not a grand passion or anything. It

was more a convenience thing. It made things easy when tax-time came around."

"So what did you really want for yourself!"

"For myself? You won't laugh? I wanted to be the kind of woman who comes

into a room and instantly everybody's got something to say about her. That's what I

wanted."

"So you wanted to be famous?"

"I guess that was part of it."

"You should ask Katya about fame. She's always said it was overrated."

"How did we get off the subject of Todd?"

"Because it's impossible to help him."

"Let me just go into the house and talk to him for a while. And maybe get

something to eat while I'm there."

"Haven't you seen enough of this place to be afraid of it yet?" Zeffer said.

"I'm almost past being afraid," Tammy replied. It was the truth. She'd seen

her share of horrors, but she'd lived to tell the tale.

They were twenty yards from one of the several staircases that ran up from

the garden into the house.

"Please," she said to Zeffer. "I just want to go inside and warn him. If

that doesn't work, I'll leave and I'll never look back, I swear."

Zeffer seemed to sense the power of her will on the subject. He put up no

further protest but simply said: "You realize if you get in Katya's way, I can't

step in to help you? I have my own allegiances, however foolish you may think they

are."

"Then I'll make sure I don't get in her way," Tammy said.

"I'm not even supposed to go into the house, believe it or not."

"Not allowed on the furniture, either?"

"If you're saying I'm little better than her dog, you're right. But it's my life. I made my choices just as you made yours." He sighed. "There are some days

when I think hard about killing myself. Just to be free of her. But it might not

work. I might slit my throat and wake up back where I started, her dead dog instead

of her living one."

Tammy's gaze slid past him to study the luminous people playing between the

trees. The sight should have astonished her; but she'd seen too much in the last

little while for this to impress her much. The scene before her was just another

piece of the Canyon's mystery.

"Are they all dead?" she asked, in the same matter-of-fact way she'd sustained through much of their exchange.

"All dead. You want to go look?" He studied her hesitation. "You do but you

don't want to admit to it. It's all right. There's a little voyeur in everybody. If

there wasn't there'd be no such thing as cinema." He turned and looked towards the

flickering figures weaving between the trees. "She used to have orgies all the time

in the Golden Age, and I liked nothing better than to pick my way amongst the

configurations and watch."

"But not now?"

"No. There's only so much human intercourse anyone can watch."

"Do they look horrible?"

"Oh no. They look the way they looked at the height of their beauty, because

that's the way they want to remember themselves. Perfect, forever. Or at least for

Page 117

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

as long as God allows this place to last."

Tammy caught the apocalyptic undertone in this. "What do you mean?" she

said.

"That sooner or later there'll be an end to this endless indulgence. A Day

of Judgment, if you will. And I think-" he dropped his voice to a whisper, though

there was no one nearby "-you may be its Deliverer."

"Me?" She also dropped her voice, "Why me?"

"It's just a hunch. A piece of wishful thinking if you like. They've had their time. And I think some of them know it. They're a little more desperate than

they used to be. A little more shrill."

"Why don't they just leave!"

ìAh. We had to come to that at last. The reason's very complex, and to tell

you the truth I would not really know where to begin. Let me put it this way. They

are afraid that if they leave this Canyon they may break the spell that keeps them

in their strange state of perfection."

ìAnd do you believe that?"

"Yes, I believe it. They're prisoners here. Beautiful prisoners."

A few minutes after Katya and Todd had left the party out on the night-lawn,

a whisper went amongst the revenants, and one by one they gave up their pleasures,

whatever they'd been, and turned their hollow gazes towards the house.

There are only so many times you can play out the old flesh games without

losing interest in them. Yes, you could add piquancy if you introduced a whip, or

some rope; you could mate with somebody of your own sex (or, if that was what you'd

done in your lifetime, with somebody of the opposite gender). But all of it grew

wearying with repetition. No feast can ever be so tempting that finally the act of

eating doesn't lose its appeal. Sooner or later even the most ambitious glutton must

crawl away and seek the solace of the vomitorium.

It was the same for the ghosts. They'd been here in the presence of their

own perfection for decades; and now it meant nothing to them. They'd seen that

beauty denied and debauched, they'd seen it locked in every configuration lust could

devise, and there was nothing left to surprise them. The presence of living flesh,

in the form of Todd Pickett, might momentarily re-ignite some old flames, but the

conflagration quickly died away once he was removed from their company.

Now their eyes went to the house, and though they said nothing, the same

thought went through all their melancholy heads.

Maybe tonight, something would change. Maybe tonight, with this man in her

company, the Queen of Sorrows would make a mistake...

A few of them began to move in the general direction of the house,

attempting to seem casual, but fixing their silvery eyes on their destination.

A bank of cloud had come in off the Pacific and covered both moon and stars.

On the ridge of the opposite side of the Canyon some of the grotesque offspring of

these weary beauties began a wordless howling in the darkness. The sound was loud

enough to carry down the hill to Sunset and the Beverly Hill flats. Several valets

parking cars for a private party on Rexford Drive paused to comment on the weird din

from up in the hills; a couple of patients, close to death at Cedars-Sinai, called

for their priests; a man who lived next door to the house on Van Nuys where Lyle and

Eric Menendez had murdered their mother and father, decided-hearing the sound-to

give up screenwriting and move back to Wisconsin.

Todd heard it too, of course.

"What in God's name is that?"

He and Katya were deep in the bowels of the house, in a place he had never

known existed, much less explored.

"Take no notice," Katya told him, as the noise came again, even louder and

more plaintive. "Whatever it is, it's out there, it's not in here with us." She took

hold of his arm, and kissed his cheek. He could smell Ava on her. His erection still

throbbed. "Are you ready?" she said to him.

"Ready for what?"

They were approaching a door just a little smaller than the front door;

and

similarly medieval in style.

"On the other side of that door is something that was given to me a long

time ago. It changed my life. As I told you, it will also change yours. When you

first get in there, it's bewildering. You just have to trust me. I'm going to be

Page 118

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

with you all the time, even if you can't always see me. And I swear no harm is going

to come to you. You understand me, Todd? This is my house. Even this place, which

will seem very remote from everything you've seen so far, is also mine."

He didn't know quite what to make of any of this, but his curiosity was

certainly piqued.

"So don't be afraid," she told him.

"I won't be," he said, wondering what kind of game she was playing now. She,

who knew so many; what did she have up her sleeve?

As had happened so many times now, she read his thoughts. "This isn't a

game," she said. "Or if it is, it's the most serious game in God's creation."

There was surely a trace of condescension here, but what the hell?

"I'm ready," he said.

She smiled. "In half an hour you'll realize what an absurd thing it is you've just said," she told him.

"Why?"

"Because nobody can be ready for this."

Then she pushed open the door.

Before Tammy went to find Todd, she had to eat. Had to.

So, while Todd was stepping over the threshold into a place that would

change his life, Tammy was in the kitchen three stories above, at the open fridge,

gorging on whatever her hands found. Cold chicken, potato salad, some Chinese

takeaway.

"Do we have to do this now?" Zeffer said, looking around nervously. "She

could come in here at any minute."

"Yes, well let her. I'm hungry, Willem. In fact I'm fucking starving. Give

me a hand here, will you?"

"What do you want?"

"Something sweet. Then I'm done."

He dug around on the inner shelves of the fridge and found an almost-intact

cherry pie, the sight of which made Tammy coo the way most women cooed when they saw

babies. Zeffer watched her with an expression of bemusement on his face. She was too

hungry to care. She lifted a slice of pie to her mouth, but before she could get it

to her tongue, Zeffer caught hold of her wrist.

"What?" she said.

"Listen."

Tammy listened. She heard nothing, so she shook her head.

"Listen," he said again, and this time she heard what he was drawing her

attention to. The windows were shaking. So were the doors. The cutlery on the sink

was rattling; as were the plates in the cupboards.

She let the slice of pie drop from her fingers, her appetite suddenly vanished.

"What's going on?" she wanted to know.

"They're downstairs," Zeffer said, his voice tinged with superstitious awe.

"Todd and Katya. They've gone downstairs."

"What are they doing there?"

"You don't want to know," Zeffer said hurriedly. "Please. I beg you. Let's

just go."

The windows were shaking with mounting violence; the boards creaked beneath

their feet. It was as though the entire structure of the house was protesting about

whatever was happening in its midst.

Tammy went to the kitchen sink, ran some cold water, and washed the food

from around her mouth. Then she skirted around Zeffer and headed to the door that

led to the turret and the staircase.

"Wrong direction," Zeffer said. He pointed to the other door. "That's the

safest way out."

"If Todd's down there, then that's the way I want to go," Tammy said.

As she spoke she felt a blast of chilly air coming up from below. It smelled

nothing like the rest of the house, nor of the gardens outside. Something about it

made the small hairs at her nape prickle.

She looked back down at Zeffer, with a question on her face.

"I think I need to tell you what's down there before you take one more step," he said.

Page 119

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

Outside, the spirits of the dead waited and listened. They had heard the

door that led into the Chamber of the Hunt opened; they knew some lucky fool was

about to step into the Devil's Country. If they could have stormed the house and

slipped through the door ahead of him, they would have gladly done so, at any price.

But Katya had been too clever. She had put up defenses against such a siege: five

icons beaten into the threshold of each of the doors that would drive a dead soul to

oblivion if they attempted to cross. They had no choice, therefore, but to keep a

respectful distance, hoping that some day the icons would lose their terrible

potency; or that Katya would simply declare an amnesty upon her guests and tear the

icons out of the thresholds, allowing her sometime lovers and friends back inside.

Meanwhile, they waited, and listened, and remembered what it had been like

for them in the old days, when they'd been able to go back and forth into the house

at will. It had been bliss, back then: all you had to do was step into the Devil's

Country and you could shed your old skin like a snake. They'd come back to the

chamber over and over, so as to restore their failing glamour, and it had dutifully

soothed away their imperfections; made their limbs sleek and their

eyes gleam.

All this was kept secret from the studio bosses, of course, and when on occasion a Goldwyn or a Thalberg did find out Katya made sure they was intimidated

into silence. Nobody talked about what went on in Coldheart Canyon, even to others

that they might have seen there. The stars went on about their public lives while in

secret they took themselves up to Coldheart Canyon every weekend, and having smoked

a little marijuana or opium, went to look at the Hunt, knowing that they would

emerge rejuvenated.

There was a brief Golden Age, when the royalty of America lived a life of

near-perfection; sitting in their palaces dreaming of immortality. And why not? It

seemed they had found the means to renew their beauty whenever it grew a little

tired. So what if they had to dabble in the supernatural for their fix of perfection; it was worth the risk.

Then-but inexorably-the Golden Age began to take its toll: the lines they'd

driven off their faces began to creep back again, deeper than ever; their eye-sight

started to fail. Back they went into the Devil's Country, desperate for its hearing

power, but the claim of time could not be arrested.

Terrible stories started to circulate amongst the lords of Tinseltown;

nightmare stories. Somebody had woken up blind in the middle of the night, it was

said; somebody else had withered before her lover's appalled eyes. Fear gripped the

Golden People; and anger too. They blamed Katya for introducing them to this ungodly

panacea, and demanded that she give them constant access to the house and the Hunt.

She, of course, refused. This quickly led to some ugly scenes: people started

appearing at the house in the Canyon in desperate states of need, beating at the

door to be let in.

Katya hardened her cold heart against them, however. Realizing she would

soon be under siege, she hired men to guard the house night and day. For several

months, through the spring and summer of 1926, she and Zeffer lived in near

isolation, ignoring the entreaties of her friends who came (often with magnificent

gifts) begging for an audience with her; and for a chance to see the Devil's

Country. She refused all but a very few.

In fact nobody truly understood what was happening in the bowels of the

house. Why should they? They were dealing in mysteries even old Father Sandru, who

had sold Zeffer the piece, did not understand. But their eager flesh had discovered

what the dry intellect of metaphysicians had not. Like opium addicts denied their

fix they went blindly after the thing that would heal their pain, without needing to

understand the pharmacology that had driven them to such desperation.

For a time they had been happy in the Canyon, they remembered; happy in

Katya's house, happy looking at the pictures of the Hunt on the tiled walls, which

had moved so curiously before their astonished eyes. So it followed- didn't it?-that

if they kept returning to the Canyon, and into that strange country of tile and

illusion they would be happy and healthy again. But Katya wouldn't let them; she was

leaving them to suffer, denied the only thing they wanted.

Of course Katya was no more knowledgeable about the alchemy at work in her

dream palace than those in her doomed circle. She knew that the gift of healing and

the fever of need that followed was all brought about by being in the Devil's

Country, but how it worked, or how long it would operate before its engines were

exhausted, she had no idea. She only knew that she felt possessive of the room. It

was hers to give and take away, as her will desired.

Page 120

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

Needless to say, the more tearful visitors she had at her gates, the more

letters she received (and the more chaotic the tone of those letters) the less

inclined she was to invite in those who'd written them, partly because she was

afraid of the depth of addiction she had unleashed in these people, partly because

she was anxious that the power of the Devil's Country might not be limitless, and

she was not about to be profligate with a power that she needed as much as they.

There might come a time, she supposed, when she would need the healing

effects of the house purely for herself, and when that time came she'd be covetous

of every wasted jot of it. This wasn't something she could afford to be generous

with; not any longer. It was her life she was playing with here; her life

everlasting. She needed to preserve the power she had locked away below ground, for

fear one day its sum was the difference between life and death.

And then-as though things were not terrible enough-they had suddenly got

worse.

It began on Monday, the 23rd of August, 1926, with the sudden death of Rudy

Valentino.

Only three weeks before he had managed to get past the guards in Coldheart

Canyon (like one of the heroes he'd so often played, scaling walls to get to his

beloved) and had pleaded with Katya to let him stay with her. He didn't feel good,

he told her; he needed to stay here in the Canyon, where he'd spent so many happy

times, and recuperate. She told him no. He became aggressive; told her-half in

Italian, half in English-that she was a selfish bitch. Wasn't it time she remembered

where she came from? he said. She was just a peasant at heart, like him. Just

because she acted like a queen didn't make her one; to which she'd snappily replied

that the same could not be said for him. He'd slapped her for that remark. She'd

slapped him back, twice as hard.

Always prone to sudden emotional swings, Valentino had promptly started to

bawl like a baby, interspersing his sobs with demands that she please

God have mercy

on him.

"I'm dying!" he said, thumping his gut with his fist. "I feel it in here!"

She let him weep until the carpet was damp. Then she had had him removed

from the house by two of her hired heavies, and tossed into the street.

It had seemed like typical Rudy melodrama at the time: I'm dying, I'm dying.

But this time he'd known his own body better than she'd given him credit for. He was

the first to pay the ultimate price for visiting the Devil's Country. Three weeks

after that tearful conversation he was dead.

The hoopla over Valentino's sudden demise hid from view a series of smaller

incidents that were nevertheless all part of the same escalating tragedy. A minor

starlet called Miriam Acker died two days after Rudy, of what was reported to be

pneumonia. She had been a visitor to the Canyon on several occasions, usually in the

company of Ramon Navarro. Pola Negri-another visitor to the Canyon-fell gravely ill

a week later, and for several days hovered on the brink of death. Her frailty was

attributed to grief at the passing of Valentino, with whom she claimed to have had a

passionate affair; but the truth was far less glamorous. She too had fallen under

the spell of the Hunt; and now, though she denied it, was sickening.

In fact death took an uncommonly large number of Hollywood's luminaries in

the next few months. And for every one who died there were ten or twenty who got

sick, and managed to recover, though none were ever possessed of their full

strength, or flawless beauty, again. The 'coincidence' was not lost on either the

fans or the journalists. "A harvest of death is sweeping Hollywood," Film Photoplay

morbidly announced, "as star after star follows the greatest star of all, Rudolph

Valentino, to the grave."

The idea that there was some kind of plague abroad caught the public's

imagination and was fed voraciously by those who'd predicted for reasons of their

own that judgment would eventually fall on Tinseltown. Preachers who'd fulminated

against the sinners of the New Sodom were now quick to point out the evidence in

support of their grim sermons. And the public, who'd a decade before taken pleasure

in crowning actors as the new Royalty of America were now just as entertained by the

spectacle of their fall from grace. They were fakes and foreigners anyway, it was

widely opined; no wonder they were falling like flies; they'd come here like

plague-rats in the first place.

Hollywood was going to Hell in a hand-cart, and it didn't matter how rich or

Page 121

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

beautiful you were, there was no escaping the cost of the high life.

Up in the Canyon, Katya dared believe she was safe: she'd added three German

Shepherd dogs to the retinue guarding her; and she had men patrolling the ridges and

the roads that led to the Canyon night and day. It was such a strange time. The

whole community was unsettled. There was talk of lights being seen in the sky;

especially in the vicinity of death-sites. A number of small cults came into being,

all with their own theories of what was happening. The most extreme interpreted

these lights as warnings from God: the end of the world was imminent, their leaders

announced, and people should prepare themselves for the Apocalypse. Others

interpreted the lights more benignly. They were messengers from God, this faction

claimed; angels sent to guide the deceased out of the coil of mortal confusions into

the next life. If this was the case then these heavenly presences were not happy

that Hell now had a stronghold in the Canyon. Though the dead came there, the lights

did not. Indeed on several occasions they were seen at the bottom of the hill, three

or four of them gathered in a cloud of luminescence, plainly unwilling to venture

into the Canyon.

For her part, Katya took such reports as evidence that her defenses were

working. Nobody could get into her precious Canyon. Or such was her conviction.

In fact her sense of security, like so much else in her increasingly fragile

life, was an illusion.

One evening, walking in the garden, the dogs suddenly got crazy, and out of

the darkness stepped Rudy Valentino. He looked entirely unchanged by death: his skin

as smooth as ever, his hair as brilliantly coifed, his clothes as flawless.

He bowed deeply to her.

"My apologies," he said, "for coming here. I know I'm not welcome.

But frankly, I didn't know where else to go."

There was no hint of manipulation in this; it seemed to be the

unvarnished

truth.

"I went home to Falcon Lair," Rudy went on, "but it's been trampled over by

so many people, it doesn't feel as though it's mine any more. Please...I beg

you...don't be afraid of me."

"I'm not afraid of you," Katya replied, quite truthfully. "There were always

ghosts in my village. We used to see them all the time. My grandmother used to sing

me to sleep, and she'd been dead ten years. But Rudy, let's be honest. I know why

you're up here. You want to get in to see the Hunt-"

"-just for a little while."

"No."

"Please."

"No!" she said, waving him away, "I really don't want to hear any more of

this. Why don't you just go back to Sicily?"

"Costellaneta."

"Wherever. I'm sure they'll be pleased to see the ghost of their favorite son."

She turned her back on him and walked back towards the house. She heard him

following on after her, his heels light on the grass, but solid enough.

"It's true what they said about you. Cold heart."

"You say whatever you like, Rudy. Just leave me alone."

He stopped following her.

"You think I'm the only one?" he said to her.

His words brought her to a halt.

"They're all going to come up here, in time. It doesn't matter how many dogs

you have, how many guards. They'll get in. Your beautiful Canyon's going to be full

of ghosts."

"Stop being childish, Rudy," she said, turning back to look at him.

"Is that how you want to live, Katya? Like a prisoner, surrounded by the

dead? Is that the life you had in mind for yourself?"

"I'm not a prisoner. I can leave whenever I want to."

And still be a great star? No. To be a star you will have to be here, in Hollywood."

"So?"

"So you will have company, night and day. The dead will be here with you,

night and day. We will not be ignored."

"You keep saying we, Rudy. But I only see you."

"The others will come. They'll all find their way here, sooner or later.
Did

you know Virginia Maple hanged herself last night? You remember
Virginia? Or perhaps

you don't. She was-

"I know Virginia. And no, I didn't know she hanged herself. Nor,
frankly, do

I much care."

"She couldn't take the pain."

"The pain?"

"Of being kept out of this house! Being kept away from the Devil's
Country."

"It's my house. I have a perfect right to invite whoever I like into it."

"You see nothing but yourself, do you?"

"Oh please, Rudy, no lectures on narcissism. Not from you, of all
people."

"I see things differently now."

"Oh I'm sure you do. I'm sure you regret every self-obsessed moment
of your

petty little life. But that's really not my problem, now is it?"

The color of the ghost before her suddenly changed. In a heartbeat he
became

a stain of yellow and gray, his fury rising in palpable waves off his
face.

"I will make it your problem," he shrieked. He strode towards her.

"You

selfish bitch."

"And what did they call you?" she snapped back. "Powder-puff, was it?"

It was an insult she knew would strike him hard. Just the year before an

anonymous journalist in the Chicago Tribune had called him 'a pink powder puff'.

'Why didn't somebody quietly drown Rudolph Guglielmi, alias Valentino, years ago?'

he'd written. Rudy had challenged the man to a boxing match, to see which of them

was truly the more virile. The journalist had of course never shown his face. But

the insult had stuck. And hearing it repeated now threw Valentino into such a rage

that he pitched himself at Katya, reaching for her throat. She had half-expected his

phantom body to be so unsubstantial that his hands would fail to make any real

contact. But not so. Though the flesh and blood of him had been reduced to an urn

full of ashes, his spirit-form had a force of its own. She felt his fingers at her

neck as though they were living tissue. They stopped her breath.

She was no passive victim. She pushed him back with the heel of one hand,

raking his features from brow to mid-cheek with the other. Blood

came from the

wounds, stinking faintly of bad meat. A disgusted expression crossed Valentino's

face, as he caught a whiff of his own excremental self. The shock of it made him

loose his hold on her, and she quickly pulled away from him.

In life, she'd remembered, he'd always been overly sensitive to smells; a

consequence, perhaps, of the fact that he'd been brought up in the stench of

poverty. His hand went up his wounded face, and he sniffed his fingers, a look of

profound revulsion on his face.

She laughed out loud at the sight. Valentino's fury had suddenly lost its

bite. It was as though in that moment he suddenly understood the depths to which the

Devil's Country had brought him.

And then, out of the darkness, Zeffer called: "What the hell's going on out-"

He didn't finish his question: he'd seen Valentino.

"Oh, Jesus Christ Almighty," he said.

Hearing the Lord's name taken in vein, Valentino-good Catholic boy that he

was-crossed himself, and fled into the darkness.

Valentino's vengeful prediction proved entirely accurate: in the next

few

weeks the haunting of Coldheart Canyon began.

At first the signs were nothing too terrible: a change in the timbre of the

coyotes' yelps, the heads torn off all the roses one night; the next all the petals

off the bougainvillea; the appearance on the lawn of a frightened deer, throwing its

glassy gaze back towards the thicket in terror. It was Zeffer's opinion that they

were somehow going to need to make peace with 'our unwanted guests', as he put it,

or the consequences would surely be traumatic. These were not ethereal presences, he

pointed out, wafting around in a hapless daze. If they were all like Valentino (and

why should they not be?) then they posed a physical threat.

"They could murder us in our beds, Katya," he said to her.

"Valentino wouldn't-"

"Maybe not Valentino, but there are others, plenty of others, who hated you

Page 123

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

with a vengeance. Virginia Maple for one. She was a jealous woman. Remember? And

then to hang herself because of something you did to her-"

"I did nothing to her! I just let her play in that damn room. A room which

you brought into our lives."

Zeffer covered his face. "I knew it would come down to that eventually. Yes,

I'm responsible. I was a fool to bring it here. I just thought it would amuse you."

She gave him a strangely ambiguous look. "Well, you know, it did. How can I

deny that? It still does. I love the feeling I get when I'm in there, touching the

tiles. I feel more alive." She walked over to him, and for a moment he thought she

was going to grant him some physical contact: a stroke, a blow, a kiss. He didn't

really mind. Anything was better than her indifference. But she simply said: "You

caused this, Willem. You have to solve it."

"But how? Perhaps if I could find Father Sandru-"

"He's not going to take the tiles back, Willem."

"I don't see why not."

"Because I won't let him! Christ, Willem! I've been in there every day since

you gave me the key. It's in my blood now. If I lose the room, it'll be the death of

me."

"So we'll move and we'll take the room with us. It's been moved

before.

"We'll leave the ghosts behind."

"Wherever the Hunt goes, they'll follow. And sooner or later they'll get so

impatient, they'll hurt us."

Zeffer nodded. There was truth in all of this, bitter though it was.

"What in God's name have we done?" he said.

"Nothing we can't mend," Katya replied. "You should go back to Romania, and

find Sandru. Maybe there's some defense we can put up against the ghosts."

"Where will you stay while I'm gone?"

"I'll stay here. I'm not afraid of Rudy Valentino, dead or alive. Nor that idiotic bitch Virginia Maple. If I don't stay, they'll find their way in."

"Would that be such a bad thing? Why not let them share the place? We could

make a pile of them on the lawn and-"

"No. That room is mine. All of it. Every damn tile."

The quiet ferocity with which she spoke silenced him. He just stared at her

for perhaps a minute, while she lit a cigarette, her fingers trembling. Finally, he

summoned up enough courage to say: "You are afraid."

She stared out of the window, almost as though she hadn't heard him. When

she spoke again her voice was as soft as it had been strident a minute ago.

"I'm not afraid of the dead, Willem. But I am afraid of what will happen to

me if I lose the room." She looked at the palm of her hand, as though she might find

her future written there. But it wasn't the lines of her hand she was admiring, it

was its smoothness. "Being in the Devil's Country has made me feel younger, Willem.

It did that to everybody. Younger. Sexier. But as soon as it's taken away..."

"...yes. You'll get sick."

"I'm never going to get sick." She allowed herself the time for a smile.

"Perhaps I'm never going to die."

"Don't be foolish."

"I mean it."

"So do I. Don't be foolish. Whatever you think the room can do, it won't

make you immortal."

The wisp of a smile remained on her face. "Wouldn't you like that, Willem?"

"No."

"Just a little bit?"

"I said no," he shook his head, his voice dropping. "Not any more."

"Meaning what?"

"What do you think I mean? This life of ours...isn't worth living."

There was a silence between them. It lasted two, three, four minutes.
Rain

began to hit the window; fat spots of it bursting against the glass.

"I'll find Sandru for you," Willem said finally. "Or if not him, somebody who knows how to deal with these things. I'll find a solution."

"Do that," she said. "And if you can't, don't bother to come back."

PART SIX

THE DEVIL'S COUNTRY

Page 124

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

ONE

Todd knew the mechanics of illusion passably well. He'd always enjoyed

watching the special effects guys at work, or the stuntmen with their rigs; and now

there was a new generation of illusionists who worked with tools that the old matte

painters and model-makers of an earlier time could not even have imagined. He'd been

in a couple of pictures in which he'd played entire scenes against blank green

screens, which were later replaced with landscapes which only existed in the ticking

minds of computers.

But the illusions at work in this room of Katya's were of another order

entirely. There was a force at work here that was both incredibly powerful and old;

even venerable. It did not require electricity to fuel it, nor equations to encode

it. The walls held it, with possessive caution, beguiling him by increments.

At first he could make virtually no sense of the images. It simply seemed

that the walls were heavily stained. Then, as his eyes became accustomed to reading

the surface, he realized he was looking at tiles, and that what he'd taken to be

stains were in fact pictures, painted and baked into the ceramic. He was standing in

a representation of an immense landscape, which looked more realistic the longer he

looked at it. There were vast expanses of dense forests; there were stretches of

sun-drenched rock; there were steep cliff-walls, their crannies nested by fearless

birds; there were rivulets that became streams, in turn converging into glittering

rivers, which wound their way towards the horizon, dividing into silver-fringed

deltas before they finally found the sea. Such was the elaboration of the painting

that it would take many hours of study, perhaps even days, to hope to discover

everything that the painters had rendered. And that would only have been the case if

the pictures had been static, which, as he was now astonished to see, was not the

case.

There were little flickers of motion all around him. A gust of wind shook

the tangle of a thicket; one of those fearless birds wheeled away from the

cliff-face, three hunting dogs sniffed their way through the undergrowth, noses to

the ground. "Katya...?" Todd said.

There was no reply from behind him (where he thought she'd last been

standing); so he looked back. She wasn't there. Nor was the door through which he'd

stepped to come into this new world. There was just more landscape: more trees, more

rocks, more birds, wheeling.

The motion multiplied with every flicker of his gaze. There were ripples on

the rivulets and streams, there were clouds over the sea, being hurried along by the

same wind that filled the sails of the ships that moved below. There were men, too,

all around. Riders, moving through the forest; some solitary, some in groups of

three or four; one procession of five horses mounted by richly attired

men, parading

solemnly between the trees. And fishermen on the banks of the streams; and on little

boats, bobbing around the sandbars at the delta; and in one place, inexplicably, two

men laid out naked on a rock, and in another, far more explicable, another pair

hanging from a tree, while their lynchers sat in the shade of the old tree they'd

put to such guilty use, and looked out at the rest of the world as they shared a

flagon of beer.

Again he looked around for Katya, but she wasn't to be seen. But she'd said

she'd be close by, even if-as now-he couldn't see her. The room, he began to

understand, had control of his eyes. He found his gaze repeatedly led away from

where she might be, led skyward, to gawk at some passing birds (there were tiles on

the vaulted roof, he saw; he could hear the squeak of the bird's wings as they

passed overhead); led into the forest, where animals he could not name moved as if

in some secret ceremony, and others fought; and others lay dead; and still others

were being born. (Though like did not spring from like in this world. In one spot an

animal the size and shape of a tiger was giving birth to half a dozen white lizards;

in another a hen the size of a horse was retreating from her eggs in panic, seeing

that they'd cracked open and were spilling huge blue flies.)

And still he kept looking. And still he kept seeing, and though there were

horrors here, to be sure, nothing in him made him want to leave off his seeing.

There was a curious calm upon his soul; a kind of dreamy indifference to his

own situation. If he'd reasoned this out perhaps he would have concluded that he

wasn't afraid because none of this could possibly be real. But he did not reason it

out. He was beyond reasoning at that moment. Beyond anything, indeed, but

witnessing. He had become a living instrument; a flesh-and-blood camera, recording

Page 125

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

this wonderland. He kept turning on his heel, counter-clockwise, as sights caught

his attention off to his left; and left again; and left again.

Everything here had a miraculous shine to it, as though whatever divinity

had made it had an army of workers at His or Her command, perpetually polishing the

world. Every leaf on every tree had its gloss; every hair on every mammal and every

scale on every reptile had its sheen; every particle of dirt, down to the shit from

the flea-infested backside of a boar, had a glamour all of its own. A rat sniffing

in the carcass of a gored hound came away with drops of corruption on its whiskers

as enchanting as a lover's eyes. The earth at his feet (yes, there were tiles there

too, painted with as much love as forest or cloud) was a surfeit of glories: a worm

his heel had half-killed was lovely in its knotted agonies.

Nothing was inconsequential here. Except perhaps, Todd Pickett. And if that

was the case, then he wasn't about to dispute the point. He would not wish anything

here other than the way it was, including-for the first time in his life-himself.

This thought-that he was finally at peace with himself-came over him like a

breaking wave, cooling a long and exhausting fever. If he was nothing here, he

thought, except the eyes with which/these strangenesses could be glorified, then

that suited him fine. And if in the end the witnessing burned him up, and made an

end to him, that was fine too; perfectly fine, to die here, watching this shining

world. It would hear no complaint from him.

"You like it?"

Ah, there was Katya. Off to his right, a little distance, staring up at the glamorous sky.

He followed her gaze, and saw something he'd missed until now: the sun was

three-quarters eclipsed by the moon. That was why the light was so peculiar here; it

was the light of a world in permanent semi-darkness; a murk which had inspired

everything that lived here to catch its own particular fire. To snatch every last

gleam of light out of the air and magnify it; to be its own exquisite advertisement.

"Yes," he said to her, hearing something very close to tears in his voice.

"I like it very much."

"Not everybody does, of course," she said, glancing over at him. "Some I

brought here were so afraid that they ran. And of course, that's not a very smart

thing to do here."

"Why not?"

She wandered over to him, assessing him as she did so, as though to see if

he was telling the truth, and that he really liked what he saw. Apparently

satisfied, she laid a light kiss on his cheek: it almost felt as though she was

congratulating him. Coming here had been a test, he realized; and he'd passed.

"You see over there, just beyond the hill? The deep forest there?"

"Yes."

"Then you also see the horsemen coming through the trees?"

"They're the reason we shouldn't run?"

"They are."

"Why?"

"They're hunters. The Duke Goga, who leads them, counts all these lands as

his own."

"They're getting closer."

"Yes they are."

"How is that possible?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean: how is it possible that they're getting closer to us? They're in the walls."

"Is that what you think?" she said, coming closer to him. "Is that what you

really believe?"

He stood still for a moment, and listened to his heart. What did his heart

tell him? The wind gusted, cold against his face. It was not a Californian wind.

Overhead, the sun remained eclipsed, though he knew there was no possible way to see

the sky from this deep a place in the house.

"I'm in another world."

"Good," she said.

"And it's real."

"Again, good. And does it trouble you, to be in the middle of such a mystery?"

"No," he said. "I don't know why and I'm not sure I care."

Page 126

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

She put her arms around him, holding him tighter than she'd held until now,

and looked deep into his eyes, looking deeper than she'd ever looked. "It doesn't

matter, my love. Whether it's in my head, or your head, or the head of God-

"-or the Devil?"

"-or the Devil. It doesn't matter. Not to us." She spoke the last three words as a near whisper, close to his ear. He kissed her. He realized now how

cannily she'd led him-teasing him with outlandish visions-ghosts and ungodly

pleasures, slowly deconstructing his beliefs about what was real and what was not.

All in preparation for this wonder of wonders.

"Nothing matters to us, huh?" he said between kisses.

"We're above it all," she said. As she spoke she put her hand down between

his legs. He was like a rock.

"You want to make love to me?"

"Of course I do."

"You want to go back up to bed?"

"No. I want to do it right here." He pointed to the hard ground at their feet.

Again, she laughed. This new-found fire in him seemed to entertain her. She

lifted up her dress, so that he could have sight of her. She was naked.

"Lie down," he told her.

She did so without a second instruction, lifting and parting her legs as she

lay at his feet, so that he should have full disclosure of her. She ran her hand

over herself. Into the groove, and out again, wet, to touch her anus. He could hear

the rhythm of the hunters' horses in the ground underfoot. Duke Goga and his party

were getting closer. Todd glanced up towards the trees. He could no longer see the

men: the forest had become too deep. But they were nearby.

No matter. He could watch the hunters another day. Right now he had sport of

his own. He unbuttoned his pants and let his dick spring out. Katya sat up instantly

and took it in her hand, rubbing it. "So big."

Maybe it was, maybe it wasn't. He liked the fact that she said it, and there

was an appetite for it in her eyes, the likes of which he'd never seen on a woman's

face before. She started to pull on his cock, not to pleasure him, simply to bring

him down to her; into her.

He went down on his knees between her legs. Such was the lightness of her

dress that it could be lifted up almost to her neck, to expose her belly and

breasts. He put his face down against her flat stomach, licking her navel then going

up to her breasts. It had always been a fantasy of his to wash a woman with his

tongue, every inch of her, from the corners of her eyes, to the cleft of her

buttocks, simply to be her servant, bathing her with his tongue. This was the woman

he would realize that fantasy with, he knew. This was the woman he would realize

every fantasy with, and hers was the body with which he could play

freely, doing

anything his heart desired; anything.

That was the only word of this sexual delirium that escaped him:

"...anything."

But she seemed to know what it meant because she raised his face from her

breasts, and smiled at him. "Yes, I know," she said. "Anything you want. And for

me-"

"Anything you want."

"Yes."

She took hold of the collar of his shirt, and drew his face closer to hers.

They kissed, while she moved beneath him, seeming not to care about the hard dirt

against her naked buttocks, her naked back. He had his hands either side of her, to

support himself. But that was all he needed to do. She was perfectly capable of

doing the rest. She lifted her hips a little and caught the head of his cock between

her labia, then, sighing, she delivered herself up and upon it in one sweet motion.

Now she put her arms around his neck, and let out a most extraordinary sigh:

a sound of complete abandonment.

Todd looked down at her face with something that began to feel like helpless

adoration. The polishers who'd put a shine on everything in this strange world must

have saved their best labors for her. The down on her cheek, the dark curve of her

lashes, the fabulous hierarchy of lilacs and blues and turquoise in her eyes, all

were perfect. She was almost unbearably beautiful: his eyes stung at the sight of

her.

"I love you," he said.

Page 127

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

The words came out with such ease that they were said before he had chance

to spoil them by making a performance out of them.

Of course he'd said it before, plenty of times (too many times, in truth)

but never like this. It sounded, for the first time, simple. Simple and true. She

raised her head from the ground, until her lips were almost touching his.

"I love you too," she whispered.

"Yes?"

"You know I do. You're the one I've waited for, Todd. All these years. I've

been patient, because I knew you'd come."

She pressed her hips up towards him, sheathing him completely. Then, still

holding onto him, she began to pull herself off him a little way, just until the

head of his dick was about to find the air, then smothering it again, down to the

root.

There was a heavy reverberation in the ground. Todd could feel it through

his palms.

"The hunters..." he said.

"Yes," she said, as though this was of little consequence. "Goga's close. We

should stay very still until he's passed by."

She drew Todd down on top of her. He couldn't see the huntsmen yet, but the

noise was getting louder nevertheless. The reverberations made the little shards of

rock around her head, decorated with tiny fragments of fossil, dance.

Finally, they came into view, rising over the crest of a hill some

twenty-five or thirty yards from where they lay, locked together.

There were five of them in the Duke's party, and they looked as though

they'd been riding for a very long time. Their horses shone with sweat, and the

men-all of whom were dressed in tattered tunics-showed signs of extreme fatigue. But

even their exhaustion had a kind of livid beauty to it. Their skin was as bright, or

brighter, than the bone that it concealed; their eyes, which were sunk deep in their

sockets, had a fevered brilliance in them. Todd wasn't surprised they looked so

harried, given the orders of beast he'd glimpsed here. Yes, there were wild pigs and

stags, but there were other kinds of creature, far less easily categorized; things

that looked as though the Devil had had a hand in their design. Lethal quarry, no

doubt. Indeed there were signs that the party had been recently attacked. One of the

horses had a number of deep gashes on its rump, and its rider had dearly suffered in

the encounter. His left arm hung limply, and a large dark bloodstain had spread from

a place under his arm across a third of his upper body. His lips were drawn back

from his teeth in pain, his eyelids drooping.

Even if Katya hadn't named the leader, it would have been clear to Todd that

he was of a higher social standing than his companions, his horse a more finely bred

animal than those the others rode, its mane and tail braided. As for the man

himself, he was almost as beautifully coifed as his mount, his full, dark beard

well-shaped, his long hair a good deal cleaner than that of his companions. But

these cosmetic polishes aside, he was in no better shape than his fellow riders. His

eyes were sunk deep into his skull and his body, for all the upright position he

held in his saddle, was full of little tics, as though he were uncomfortable in his

own skin. In his left hand he held the reins of his horse. His right rested on the

golden pommel of his sword, ready to unsheathe the blade in a heartbeat.

Todd had never played in a medieval movie-his face was far too contemporary,

and his acting skills too rudimentary for an audience to believe him as anything but

a modern man. But he'd seen his share of epics: the kind Heston had made in the

fifties and early sixties: all rhetoric and pose-striking. The men approaching them

looked nothing like the well-fed heroes of those epics. Their bodies were wizened,

their looks so intense they looked more like escaped lunatics than hunters.

Goga raised his right hand (which was missing two fingers) and with a silent

gesture slowed the advance of the party. The men-sensing their

leader's

apprehension-proceeded to scan the landscape around them, looking for some sign of

their enemy, whoever, or whatever, it was.

Todd stayed very still, just as Katya had instructed. Had these men been

gun-slingers, he would have described them as trigger-happy. Plainly they were

nervous and exhausted; not men to meddle with.

But even as he lay there, barely daring to breathe, he felt Katya reach down

between his legs and proceed to stroke his balls. He gave her an astonished look,

which she returned with a mischievous little smile. She stroked him back to full

erection, and then subtly maneuvered her body so that he was once again fully

Page 128

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

sheathed by her. The sensation felt even more extraordinary than it had a few

minutes before. Without seeming to move her hips she contrived to make waves of

motion move up and down her channel, massaging him.

All the while, the horsemen approached, and the closer they came the more

desperate they looked. These were men who apparently lived in a

constant state of

fear, to judge by their expressions. One of the Duke's four followers, the oldest

and the most scarred, mumbled a prayer to himself as he rode, and in his hand he

clutched a plain wooden cross, which more than once he kissed, for comfort's sake.

Todd was somewhere between ecstasy and panic. He didn't dare move, even if

he'd wanted to. Katya, meanwhile was free to play havoc with his nerve-endings. He

didn't move his hips; he didn't need to. She had all the moves. Her internal

manipulations were becoming more elaborate all the time, driving him closer and

closer to losing control.

Todd had always been a noisy lover; sometimes embarrassingly so. (A

memorable night with a girlfriend in a suite at the Chateau Marmont had been brought

to a premature halt when the manager had called up his room to regretfully report

that the guests in an adjacent suite couldn't sleep for all his moans.) Now the best

he could do was bite his lip until he tasted blood, and will himself not to let a

sound escape him.

The horsemen were so close now that he did not dare move his head to look at

them. But he could just see them from the corner of his eye. The Duke gave an order,

in Romanian: "Stai! N-auzi ceva?" The men brought their horses to a halt, the Duke

no more than four yards from where Todd and Katya lay on the ground. Had it not been

for the fact that the eclipse rendered the light here so deceptive, the pair would

surely have been seen, and dispatched: a single blade skewering them both in an

instant. But as far as Todd's limited vision could tell, the men were looking

further afield for their quarry, scanning the distant landscape rather than the

ground yards from their horses' hooves.

There was another exclamation from the Duke, and this time a response from

one of his men. Todd had the impression that they were listening for something. He

listened along with them. What could he hear? Nothing out of the ordinary. The cry

of birds, wheeling overhead; the coarse breathing and snorting of the horses; the

slap of the reins against their massive necks. And closer by, the breathing of the

woman beneath him; and-a smaller sound still-the rhythmical click of a beetle as it

made its clockwork way over the small stones close to his hand. In his mind's eye

all of this around the tender place where their bodies met: the bird
and the horse

and the stones and the beetle, orbiting his pleasure.

He saw her smile beneath him, and with the tiniest contraction of her
vulva

she brought him to the point of no return. There was a flash of
brightness in his

head, which momentarily washed everything out. She came back out
of the fog to meet

him with her eyes half-closed, her pupils so full beneath them that
they seemed to

edge out the whites. Then her lids fluttered closed completely and he
started to

spurt into her. He could not have stopped crying out if his life had
depended on it.

No; it did. And still he let out a sob of relief-

There was a shout. The Duke was issuing an order. It made no sense to
Todd,

but he looked up anyway, as his body continued its spastic motion,
emptying itself

into her. The man who'd dismounted was now striding towards them,
unleashing his

sword.

The Duke spoke again:

"Cine sunt acesti oameni?"

He obviously wanted to know who the hell these people were, because
by way

of reply there were shrugs from the other men. The last spasm passed through Todd's

body, and with it went the idiot sense of his own inviolability. The bliss was gone.

He was empty, and mortal again.

The man with the sword put his boot into Todd's side. It was a hard kick,

and threw him off Katya. He rolled over in the dirt, which got a laugh from the

youngest of the men, seeing the lovers wetly parted thus.

The Duke was issuing further orders, and in response another of the riders

dismounted, his sword drawn. Todd spat out a mouthful of earth, and made an attempt

to push his rapidly wilting erection back into his pants before it became a target.

Katya was still lying on the ground (though she too had managed to cover her

nakedness); the first of the men who'd dismounted was standing over her, his sword

dropped so that its point hung no more than two or three inches above her pale,

slender neck

Page 129

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

The first word out of Todd's mouth was: "Please..."

The nobleman was looking at him with a strange expression on his

face: part

amusement, part suspicion.

"I don't know if you can understand me," Todd said to him. "But we meant no

harm."

He glanced down at Katya, who was staring up at the blade.

"He doesn't know what you're saying," she said. "Let me try." She spoke now

in the language of the lord. "Doamne, eu si prietenul meu suntem vizitatori prin

locurile astea. N-am stut ca este proprietatea domniei tale."

Todd looked and listened, wondering what the hell she was saying. But her

explanation, whatever it was, didn't seem to be making any great change in their

circumstances. The sword was still at her throat, while the second horseman was now

within two or three yards of Todd, waving his own blade around in a highly menacing

fashion.

Todd glanced up at the Duke again. The trace of amusement Todd had thought

he'd seen there had gone. There was only suspicion now. It crossed Todd's mind that

perhaps it had been an error for Katya to speak in the man's tongue; that perhaps

she'd only deepened his belief that these lovers were more than over-

heated

trespassers.

He felt a prick in the middle of his chest. The cold point of the sword was

pressed into his skin. A small pool of blood was already coming from the spot,

spreading through the weave of his shirt.

Katya had stopped talking for a moment-Todd thought perhaps she realized she

was doing more harm than good-but now she began again, making whatever pleas she

could.

The man on the braided horse raised his hand.

"Liniste," he said.

He'd obviously told her to shut the hell up, because that was exactly what

she did.

There was a sound on the wind; and it instantly had all of the nobleman's

attention. Somewhere not so far away a baby was crying: a mournful wail of a sound,

that-though it was surely human-reminded Todd of the noise the coyotes would make

some nights in the Canyon.

After a few moments of listening; the Duke let out a stream of orders:

"Lasati-i! Pe cai! Ala-i copilul!"

The two men who'd been threatening Katya and Todd sheathed their swords and

returned to their mounts. The baby's cry seemed to falter for a moment, and Todd

feared it would fade completely and the swordsmen would return to their threats, but

then the infant seemed to find a new seam of grief to mine, and the wail rose up

again, more plaintive than ever.

The men were exchanging more urgent words; and pointing in the direction

from which the sound was coming.

"Este acolol Grabiti-va!"

"In padure! Copilul este Ón padure!"

Katya and Todd were summarily forgotten. The horsemen were by now all

re-mounted, and the Duke was already galloping away, leaving his weary company to

follow in his dust.

Todd felt a curious sense of betrayal; the kind felt when a story takes an

unanticipated turn. That he should have come into this half-eclipsed world and been

made to bleed at the point of a sword seemed absolutely apt. That the man who'd

threatened him had ridden away to pursue a crying baby did not.

"What the hell is going on?" he said as he bent to help Katya up off the

ground.

"They heard Qwaftzefoni, the Devil's child," she said.

"Who?"

She looked back in the direction of the riders. They were already halfway to

the line of densely packed trees from which the pitiful summons had seemed to come,

receding into the quarter-light as though being steadily erased.

"It's a long story," she said. "I heard it first when I was a child...and it used to frighten me..."

"Yes?" he said.

"Oh yes."

"Well," Todd said, a little impatiently, "are you going to tell me?"

Page 130

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"I don't know if it'll frighten you."

He wiped the blood from the middle of his chest with the heel of his hand.

There was a deep nick in his chest, which instantly welled with blood again.

"Tell me anyway," he said.

TWO

Though it had been Zeffer who'd offered the explanation of what lay down in

the guts of the house, Tammy opened the conversation with a question that had been

niggling at her since she'd first come into this place. She returned to the kitchen

table, where she'd been eating her cherry pie, sat down and said: "What are you

afraid of?"

"I told you twice, three times: I shouldn't be in here. She'll be angry."

"That doesn't answer the question. Katya's just a woman, for God's sake. Let

her be angry!"

"You don't know what she can be like."

"Why don't you try telling me? Then maybe I'll understand."

"Tell you," he said flatly, as though the request was impossible. "How can I

tell you what this place has seen? What I was? What she was?"

"Try."

"I don't know how," he said, his voice getting weaker, syllable on syllable,

until she seemed sure it would crack and break. He sat down at the table opposite

her, but he said nothing.

"All right," Tammy said. "Let me give you a hand." She thought for a moment.

Then she said: "Start with the house. Tell me why it was built. Why you're in it.

Why she's in it."

"Back then we did everything together."

"Who is she?"

"I'll tell you who she was: she was Katya Lupi, a great star. One of the greatest, some would once have said. And in its day this house was one of the most

famous houses in Los Angeles. One of the great dream palaces."

"And the rest of the Canyon is hers too?"

"Oh yes, it's all hers. Coldheart Canyon. That's what they called it. She had a reputation, you see, for being a chilly bitch." He smiled, though there was

more rue in the expression than humor. "It was deserved."

"And the things out there?"

"Which things?"

"Which things?" Tammy said, a little impatiently. "The freaks. The things

that attacked me."

"Those? Those are the children of the dead."

"You say these things so casually. The children of the dead. Believe it or

not, the dead don't have kids in Sacramento. They just rot away quietly."

"Well it's different here."

"Willem, I don't care how different it is: the dead can't have children."

"You saw them. Believe your eyes."

Tammy shook her head. Not in disbelief, rather in frustration. How could it

be that the rules of the world worked one way in one place, and so very differently

in another?

"The truth is: I don't know," Zeffer said, answering her unspoken question.

"Over the years the ghosts have mated with the animals, and the results are those

things. Maybe the dead are closer to the condition of animals. I don't know. I only

know it's real. I've seen them. You've seen them. They're hybrids. Sometimes there's

a kind of beauty in them. But mostly...ugly as sin."

"All right. So I buy the hybrids. But why here? Is it her!"

"In a roundabout way, I suppose..." He mused for a moment, and

then-apparently with great effort, as though since they'd come into the house a

lifetime of suffering had caught up with him-he got to his feet. He went to the

sink, and turned on the faucet, running the water hard. Then, cupping his hand, he

took some up to his lips and drank noisily. This done, he turned off the faucet and

looked over his shoulder at her.

"I know in my heart you deserve to know everything, after all you've

been

through. You've earned the truth." He turned fully to her. "But before I tell you,

let me say I'm not sure I understand any of this much more than you do."

"Well I understand nothing," Tammy said.

Page 131

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

He nodded. "Well, then. How do I start this? Ah. Yes. Romania." He put his

hand up to his face, and wiped some water off his lower lip. "Katya was born Katya

Lupescu in Romania. A tiny village called Ravbac. And in the summer of 1921, just

after we'd built this house, I went back with her to her homeland, because her

mother was sick and was not expected to live more than another year.î

"She'd been brought up in utter poverty. Abuse and poverty. But now she was

a great star, coming home, and it was extraordinary really, to see how she had

transformed herself. From these beginnings to the woman she'd become.

îAnyway, there was a fortress close to the village where Katya was born, and

it was run by the Order of St. Teodor, who made it their business to protect the

place. When we arrived, Katya and myself had both been given a tour, but she wasn't

very interested in the old fortress and priests with halitosis. Neither was I,

frankly, but I wanted to leave her with her family to talk over old times, so I went

back to the Goga Fortress a second day. The monk who took me round made it dear that

the Order had fallen on hard times, and the brothers needed to sell off what they

could. Tapestries, chairs, tables: it was all up for sale.î

"Frankly, I didn't care for much of it, and I was about to leave.î

"Then he said: let me show you something special, really special. And I

thought: what the hell? Ten more minutes. And he took me down several flights of

stairs into a room the likes of which I'd never seen before."

"What was in there?"

"It was decorated with tiles-thousands of tiles-and they were all painted,

so when you walked into the room it was almost as though-no; it was as though you

were walking into another world." He paused, contemplating the memory of this; awed

by it still, after all these years.

"What kind of a world?" Tammy asked him.

îA world that was both very real and completely invented. It had space for

sky and sea and birds and rabbits. But it also had a little pinch of Hell in the

mix, just to make things more interesting for the men who lived in that world."

"What men?"

"Well, one man in particular. His name was Duke Goga. And he was there in

the walls, on a hunt that would last until the end of time."

"The man on the horse," Katya said, "was the Duke."

"I got that," Todd said.

"He lived a long time ago. I'm not sure of exactly when. When you're a little child you don't listen to those kind of details. It's the story you remember.

And the story was this:â

"One day in autumn the Duke went out hunting, which he did all the time-it

was his favorite thing to do-and he saw what he thought was a goat, trapped in a

briar-thicket. So he got off his horse, telling his men that he wanted to kill this

animal himself. He hated goats, having been attacked by one and badly hurt as a baby

He still had scars on his face from that attack, and they ached in the cold weather,

all of which served to keep his hatred of goats alive. Perhaps it was a petty thing,

this hatred; but sometimes little things can be the unmaking of us.

There's no doubt

that Goga would not have pursued his goat as far as he did had he not been injured

as a child. And then-to make matters worse-as he approached the animal history

virtually repeated itself. The animal reared up, striking the Duke with its

blackhoof and cracking his nose. The goat then ran off.â

"Goga was furious, beside himself with fury! To have been mistreated by a

goat twice! He got straight back on his horse, blood pouring from his broken nose,

and went after the animal, riding hard through the forest to catch up with it. His

entourage went with him, because they were bound to follow the Duke wherever he

went. But they were beginning to suspect that there was something strange about

where they were headed and that it would be better for them all if they just turned

round and rode back to the Fortress."

"But Goga wouldn't do that?"

"Of course not. He was determined to chase down the animal that had struck

him. He wanted revenge on the thing. He wanted to stick his sword through it, and

cut out its heart and eat it raw. That was the kind of rage he was in.

"So he kept riding. And his men, out of loyalty, kept following, further and

further from the Fortress and the paths they knew, into the depths of the forest.

Steadily even the Duke began to realize that what his men were whispering was right:

there were creatures here, lurking about, the likes of which God had not made. He

Page 132

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

could see things between the trees that didn't belong in any of the bestiaries he

had in the Fortress. Strange, ungodly creatures."

As Katya told her story, Todd glanced at the dark mass of trees into which

Goga and his men had just ridden. Was that the Deep Wood she had just described?

Surely it was. The same horsemen. The same trees. In other words, he was standing in

the middle of Katya's story.

"So...the Duke kept riding, and riding, driving his poor horse as he

followed the leaping goat deeper and deeper into the forest, until they were in a

place where there were certain no human being had ever ventured before. By now, all

the men, even the most loyal, the bravest of them, were begging the Duke to let them

turn back. The air was bitter and sulfurous, and in the ground beneath the horses'

hooves the men could hear the sound of people sobbing, as though living souls had

been buried alive in the black, smoking dirt.

"But the Duke would not be moved from his ambition. 'What kind of hunters do

you call yourselves?' he said to his men, 'If you won't go after a goat? Where's

your faith in God? There's no danger to us here, if our hearts are pure.'"

"So on they went, the men quietly offering up prayers for the safety of their souls as they rode.

"And eventually, after a long chase, their quarry came in sight again. The

goat was standing in a grove of trees so old they had been planted before the Flood,

in the tangled roots of which grew mushrooms that gave off the smell of dead flesh.

The Duke got off his horse, drew his sword and approached the goat.

"'Whatever thing you are,' he said to the animal, 'breathe your last.'"

"Nice line," Todd remarked.

"The animal reared up, as though it was going to strike the Duke with its

hoof a third time, but Goga didn't give it the opportunity. He quickly drove his

sword up into the belly of the animal.â

As soon as it felt the sword entering its flesh the goat opened its mouth

and let out a pitiful wail..."

Katya paused here, watching Todd, waiting for him to put the pieces together.

"Oh Christ," he said. "Like a baby?"

"Exactly like a baby. And hearing this pitiful human sound escaping the

animal, Goga pulled his sword from the goat's body, because he knew something unholy

was in the air. Have you ever seen an animal slaughtered?"

"No."

"Well there's a lot of blood. A lot more than you think there's going to be.â

"It was like that now?"

"Yes. The goat was thrashing around in a pool of red, its back legs kicking

up the wet dirt, so that it splattered Goga and his men. And as it did so, it started

to change."

"Into what?"

Katya smiled the smile of a storyteller who had her audience hooked by some

unexpected change of direction.

"Into a little child," she said. A boy, a naked little boy, with a nub of a tail and yellow eyes and goat's ears. So now the Duke is looking down at this

goat-boy, twitching in the mud made of dirt and blood, and the superstitious terror

which his men had felt finally seized hold of him too. He starts to speak a prayer.

"T?tal Nostru care ne e?ti in Ceruri, sfin_easca-se numele T?u. Fie

Imp?r?tia Ta, fac?-se voia Ta, precum Ón cer a?a si pe p?m?nt."

Todd listened to the unfamiliar words, knowing in the cadence that what

Katya was reciting was not just any prayer; it was the Lord's Prayer.

"P'inea noastr? cea de toate zilele d?ne-o nou? azi si ne iart? nou?

greselile noa?tre."

He scanned the landscape as he heard the prayer repeated; nothing had

changed since he'd first set eyes on the place. The light of the eclipse held

everything in suspension: the trees, the ships, the lynchers at their tree.

The rush of pleasure he'd experienced when he first arrived had diminished

somewhere in the midst of Katya's tale-telling. In its place there was now a

profound unease. He wanted to stop her telling her story, but what reason could he

give that didn't sound cowardly?

So she continued.

Page 133

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"The Duke retreated, leaving his sword stuck deep in the body of the goat-boy. He intended to climb back onto his horse and ride away, but his steed had

already bolted in terror. He called to one of his men to dismount, so that he might

have the man's horse, but before the fellow could obey the rock beneath their feet

began to shake violently, and a great chasm opened up in the ground in front of

them.î

"The men knew what they were witnessing. This was the very mouth of Hell,

gaping in the earth beneath their feet. It was thirty, forty feet wide, and the

roots of those ancient trees lined it like the veins of a skinned body. Smoke rose

up out of the maw, stinking of every foul thing imaginable, and a good deal that was

not. It was such a bitter stench that the Duke and his men began to weep like

children.î

"Half-blinded by his own tears, and without a horse, Goga had no choice but

to stay where he was, on the lip of the Hell's Mouth, close to where his

victim lay.

He tore his gloves from his hands and did his best to clear the tears from his

eyes.î

îAs he did so he saw somebody coming up out of the earth. It was a woman, he

saw; with hair so long it trailed the ground fully six feet behind her. She was

naked, except for a necklace of white fleas with eyes that burned like fires in

their tiny heads. Thousands of them, moving back and forth around the woman's neck

and up over her face, busy about the business of prettifying her.î

"She was not looking at the Duke. Her black-red eyes, which had neither

lashes nor brows, were on the goat-boy. In the time it had taken for the mouth of

Hell to open, the last of the boy's life had poured out of him. Now the child's

corpse lay still in the wet dirt.î

"îYou killed my child,' the woman said as she emerged from the infernal

mouth. 'My beautiful Qwaftzefoni. Look at him. Barely a boy. He was perfect. He was

my joy. How could you do such a heartless thing?'î

îAt that moment one of the horsemen behind the Duke attempted to make an

escape, spurring his horse. But the goat-boy's mother raised her hand
and at her

instruction a gust of wind came up out of the depths of Hell, so strong
that it drew

her hair around her and forward, like a thousand filament fingers
pointing towards

the escaping man. He didn't get very far. The wind she'd summoned
was filled with

barbs; like the vicious seedlings of ten thousand flowers. They spiraled
as they

flew, and they caught the Duke's man in a whirling of tiny hooks.
Blinded by the

assault, the man toppled from his horse, and attempted to outrun the
barbs. But they

were fastened onto him, and their motion continued, circling his body,
so that the

man's flesh was unraveled like a ball of red twine. He screamed as the
first

circling took off his skin, and redoubled his shrieks when a second
cloud of barbs

caught his naked muscle, and repeated the terrible cycle. Having
drawn off a length

of the man's tissue, they described a descending spiral around him,
leaving the

victim clear for a third and fourth assault. His bone was showing now;
his screams

had ceased. He dropped to his knees and fell forward in his own
shreddings, dead.î

"Overhead carrion birds circled, ready to gorge themselves as soon as

the

body was abandoned.î

"This man is the lucky one amongst you,' the woman said to the Duke.
'He

has escaped lightly. The rest of you will suffer long and hard for what
you have

done today.'î

"She looked down at the goat-boy's corpse, her hair crawling around
her

heels to fondly touch the body of the child.î

"The Duke fell to his knees, knotting his hands together to make his
plea.

'Lady,' he said to her, in his native tongue. "This was an accident. I
believed the

boy to be an animal. He was running from me in the form of a goat.'î

"That is his father's chosen form, on certain nights,' the woman
replied.

Goga knew, of course, what was signified by this. Only the Devil
himself took the

form of a goat. The woman was telling him that she was Lilith, the
Devil's wife, and

that the child he had killed was the Devil's own offspring. To say this
was not good

news was an understatement. The Duke concealed his terror as best he
could, but it

was terror he felt. To be standing on the lip of Hell, accused of the
crime before

him, was a terrifying prospect. His soul would be forfeit, he feared. All he could

do was repeat what he'd said: 'I took the boy to be a goat. This was a grievous

error on my part, and I regret it with all my heart-'

"The woman raised her hand to silence him."

"My husband has seventy-seven children by me. Qwaftzefoni was his favorite.

Page 134

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

What am I supposed to tell him when he calls for his beloved boy, and the child does

not come as he used to?"

"The Duke had barely any spittle in his throat. But he used what little he

had to reply. 'I don't know what you will say.'"

"You know who my husband is, don't you? And don't insult me by pretending

innocence."

"I think he is the Devil, ma'am," the Duke Goga replied."

"That he is," the woman said, 'And I am Lilith, his first wife. So now, what

do you think your life is worth?"

"Goga mused on this for a moment. Then he said: 'Christ save my soul. I fear

my life is worth nothing.'"

"So," said Zeffer, "Goga's Hunt was painted on every wall of this room.

Not just the walls. The ceiling, too. And the floor. Every inch of the place

was covered with the genius of painter and tile-maker. It was astonishing. And I

thought-"

"You'd give this astonishing thing to the woman you idolized."

"Yes. That's exactly what I thought. After all, it was utterly unique.

Something strange and wonderful. But that wasn't the only reason I wanted to buy it,

now I look back. The place had a power over me. I felt stronger when I was in that

room. I felt more alive. It was a trick, of course. The room wanted me to liberate

it-"

"How can a room want anything?" Tammy said. "It's just four walls."

"Believe me, this was no ordinary room," Zeffer said. He lowered his voice,

as though the house itself might be listening to him. "It was commissioned, I

believe, by a woman known as the Lady Lilith. The Devil's wife."

This was a different order of information entirely, and it left Tammy

speechless. In her experience so far, she'd found the Canyon a repository of

grotesqueries, no doubt; but they'd all been derived from the human, however muddled

the route. But the Devil? That was another story; deeper than anything she'd

encountered so far. And yet perhaps his presence or the echo of his presence, was

not so inappropriate. Wasn't he sometimes called the Father of Lies? If he and his

works belonged anywhere, Hollywood was probably as good a place as any.

"Did you have any idea what you were buying?" she said to Zeffer.

"I had a very vague notion, but I didn't really believe it. Father Sandru

had talked about a woman who'd occupied the Fortress for several years while the

room was made."

"And you think this woman was Lilith?"

"I believe it was," Zeffer said. "She made a place to trap the Duke in, you

see."

"No, I don't see,"

"The Duke had killed her beloved child. She wanted revenge, and she wanted

it to be a long, agonizing revenge."

"But it had been an accident-an honest error on the Duke's part-and she knew

the law would not allow her to take the soul of a man who killed her child."

"Why would she care about the law?"

"It wasn't our human law she cared about. It was God's law, which governs

Earth, Heaven and Hell. She knew that if she was going to make the Duke and his men

suffer as she wished to make them suffer, she would have to find some secret place,

where God would not think to look. A world within a world, where the Duke would have

to hunt forever, and never be allowed to rest..."

Now Tammy began to understand. "The room," she murmured.

"Was her solution. And if you think about it, it's a piece of genius. She moved into the Fortress, claiming that she was a distant cousin of the missing

Duke-"

"And where was he?"

"Anybody's guess. Maybe she held him in his own dungeons, until the hunting

grounds were ready for him.î

"Then she brought tile-makers from all over Europe-Dutch, Portuguese,

Belgians, even a few Englishmen-and painters, again, from every place of

excellence-and they worked for six months, night and day, to create what awaits you

downstairs. It would look like the Duke's hunting grounds-at least superficially.

There would be forests and rivers and, somewhere at the horizon,

there'd be the sea.

But she would play God in this world. She'd put creatures into it that she had

Page 135

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

conjured up from her own personal menagerie: monsters that the painters in her

employ would render with meticulous care. And then she'd take the souls of the Duke

and his men-still living, so that she remained within the law-and she'd put them

into the work, so that it would be a prison for them. There they would ride under a

permanent eclipse, in a constant state of terror, barely daring to sleep for fear

one of her terrible beasts would take them. Of course that's not all that's on the

walls down there. Her influence invaded the minds of the men who worked for her, and

every filthy, forbidden thing they'd ever dreamed of setting down they were given

the freedom to create.â

"Nothing was taboo. They took their own little revenges as they painted:

particularly on women. Some of the things they painted still shock me after all

these years."

"Are you certain all of this is true?"

"No. It's mostly theory. I pieced it together from what I researched.

Certainly Duke Goga and several of his men went missing during an eclipse on April

19th, 1681. The body of one of them was found stripped of its skin. That's also

documented. The rest of the party were never found. The Duke had lost his wife and

children to the plague so there was no natural successor. He had three brothers,

however, and-again, this is a matter of documented history-they gathered the

following September, almost six months to the day after the Duke's disappearance, to

divide their elder brother's spoils. It was a mistake to do so. That was the night

the Lady Lilith took occupancy of the Goga Fortress."

"She killed them?"

"No. They all left of their own free will, saying they wanted no part of owning the Fortress or the land, but were giving it over to this mysterious cousin,

in their brother's name. They signed a document to that effect, and left. All three

were dead within a year, by their own hand."

"And nobody was suspicious?"

"I'm sure a lot of people were suspicious. But Lilith-or whoever she was-now

occupied the Fortress. She had money, and apparently she was quite liberal with it.

Local merchants got rich, local dignitaries were rather charmed by her, if the

reports are to be believed."

"Where did you find all these reports?"

"I bought most of the paperwork relating to the Fortress from the Fathers.

They didn't want it. I doubt they even knew what most of it was. And to tell the

truth a lot of it was rather dull. The price of pigs' carcasses; the cost of having

a roof made rain-proof...the usual domestic business."

"So Lilith was quite the little house-maker?"

"I think she was. Indeed I believe she intended to have the Fortress as a

place she could call her own. Somewhere her husband wouldn't come; couldn't come,

perhaps. I found a draft of a letter which I believe she wrote, to him-"

"To the Devil?" Tammy replied, scarcely believing she was giving the idea

the least credence.

"To her husband," Zeffer replied obliquely, "whoever he was." He tapped his

pocket. "I have it, here. You want to hear it?"

"Is it in English?"

"No. In Latin." He reached into his jacket and took out a piece of

much-folded paper. It was mottled with age. "Take a look for yourself," he said.

"I don't read Latin."

"Look anyway. Just to say you once held a letter written by the Devil's wife. Go on, take it. It won't bite."

Tammy reached out and took the paper from Zeffer's hand. None of this was

proof, of course. But it was more than a simple fabrication, that much was clear.

And hadn't she seen enough in her time in the Canyon to be certain that whatever was

at work here was nothing she could explain by the rules she'd been taught in school?

She opened the letter. The hand it had been written in was exquisite; the

ink, though it had faded somewhat, still kept an uncanny luster, as though there

were motes of mother-of-pearl in it. She scanned it, all the way down to the

immaculate and elaborate Lilith that decorated the bottom portion of the page.

"So," she said, handing it back, her fingers trembling slightly. "What does

it say?"

"Do you really want to know?"

"Yes."

Zeffer began translating it without looking at the words. Plainly he had the

Page 136

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

contents by heart.

"Husband, she writes, I am finding myself at ease in the Fortress Goga, and

I believe will remain here until our son is found-"

"So she didn't tell him?"

"Apparently not." Zeffer scanned the page briefly. "She talks a little about

the work she's doing on the Fortress...it's all very matter-of-fact...then she says:

Do not come, husband, for you will find no welcome in my bed. If there is some peace

to be made between us I cannot imagine it being soon, given your violations of your

oath. I do not believe you have loved me in many years, and would prefer you did not

insult me by pretending otherwise."

"Huh."

Whatever the source of the letter, its sentiments were easily understood.

Tammy herself might have penned such a letter-in a simpler style, perhaps; and a

little more viciously-on more than one occasion. God knows, Arnie had violated his

own vows to her several times, shamelessly.

Zeffer folded the letter up. "So, you can make what you want of all this.

Personally I think it's the real thing. I believe this woman was Lilith, and that

she stayed in the Fortress to work on her revenge, where neither God nor her husband

would come and bother her. Certainly somebody created that room, and it was somebody

who had powers that go far beyond anything we understand."

"What happened when she was finished?" Tammy asked.

"She packed up and disappeared. Got bored perhaps. Went back to her husband.

Or found a lover of her own. The point is, she left the Fortress with the room still

intact. And with Goga and his men still in it."

And that's what you bought?"

"That's what I bought. Of course it took a little time to realize it, but I

purchased a little piece of Hell's own handiwork. And let me tell you-to make light

of all this for a moment-it was Hell to move. There were thirty three thousand, two

hundred and sixty-eight tiles. They all had to be removed, cleaned, numbered, packed

away, shipped and then put up again in exactly the same order that they'd been

assembled in. I timed it so that the work could be done while Katya

was off on a

world tour, publicizing one of her pictures."

"It must have driven you half crazy..."

"I kept thinking about how much pleasure Katya would derive from the room

when it was finished. I was oblivious to the human cost. I just wanted Katya to be

astonished; and then, to look at me-who'd given her this gift-with new eyes. I

wanted her to be so grateful, so happy, she'd fling herself into my arms and say

"I'll marry you. That's what I wanted."

"But that's not the way it turned out?"

"No, of course not."

"What happened? Did she dislike the room?"

"No, she understood the room from the beginning, and the room understood

her. She started to take people down there, to show the place off. Her special

friends. The ones who were obsessed with her. And there were plenty of those. Men

and women both. They'd disappear down there for a few hours-"

"These were people she was having sex with?"

"Yes."

"You said both men and women?"

"Preferably together. That's what she liked best. A little of both."

"And did everybody know?"

"About her tastes? Of course. Nobody cared. It was rather chic at the time.

For women anyway. The nancy-boys like Navarro and Valentino, they had to cover it

up. But Katya didn't care what people thought. Especially once she had the room."

"It changed her?"

"It changed everyone who went into it, myself included. It changed our

flesh. It changed our spirits."

"How?"

"All you have to do is look at me to see how I changed. I was born in 1893.

But I don't look it. That's because of the room. It has energies, you see, painted

into the tiles. I believe it's Lilith's magic, in the tiles. She used her infernal

skills to lock the Duke and his men and all those animals into the illusion: that's

strong magic. The monks knew that. But they had the good sense to keep their

distance from the place."

"So did everyone who went down there stay young?"

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"Oh no. By no means. It affected everyone a little differently. Some people

simply couldn't take it. They went in for a minute, and they were out again in a

heartbeat."

"Why?"

"It's the Devil's Country, Tammy. Believe me, it is."

Tammy shook her head, not knowing what to believe. "So some people left,

because they thought the Devil was in there?"

"That's right. But most people felt some extra burst of energy when they

went in the room. Maybe they felt a little younger, a little stronger, a little more

beautiful."

And what was the price of it all?"

"Good question," he said. "The fact is, everyone's paid a different price.

Some people went crazy, because of what they saw in there. A few committed suicide.

Most...went on living, feeling a little better about themselves. For a while at

least. Then the effect would wear off, and they'd need to come back for another

fix...

"I knew a number of opium addicts in my life. One of them was a

Russian

designer, Anatole Vasilinsky. Ever heard of him?" Tammy shook her head. "No real

reason why you should. He worked for the Ballet Russes, under Diaghilev. A brilliant

man. But completely enslaved to 'The Poppy' as he used to call it. He came to the

house, only once, and of course Katya showed him the room. I remember the look on

his face when he came out. He looked like a man who'd just seen his own death. He

was stricken; clammy-white, shaking. 'I must never come here again,' he said. 'I

don't have enough room in my life for two addictions. It would be the death of me.'

"That's what the room was, of course: an addiction. It addicted the flesh,

by making you feel stronger, sleeker. It addicted the spirit, by giving you visions

so vivid they were more real than real. And it addicted the soul, because you didn't

want any other kind of comfort, once you'd been in the room. Prayer was no use to

you, laughter was no use to you, friends, ideals, ambitions...they all seemed

inconsequential in that perpetual twilight. When you were here, you thought all the

time about being there."

Again Tammy shook her head. There was so much here to try and make sense of.

Her mind was reeling.

"Do you see now why you must leave, and forget about Todd? He's seen the

room. That's where she took him."

"Are you sure?"

"He's down there right now," Zeffer said. "I guarantee it. Where else would

she take him?"

Tammy got up from the table. The food had done her good. Though she still

felt a little light-headed, she was considerably stronger.

"There's nothing heroic about sacrificing yourself for him," Zeffer pointed

out. "He wouldn't do it for you."

"I know that."

Zeffer followed her to the kitchen door. "So don't. Leave, while you can.

Tammy, I beg you. Leave. I'll lead you out of the Canyon and you can go home."

"Home," Tammy said. The word, the idea, seemed hollow, valueless.

There was no home for her after this. Or if there was, it wasn't the one

she'd had. Arnie, the little house in Sacramento. How could she even think of going

back to that?

"I have to find Todd," she said. "That's what I came here to do."
Without

waiting for Zeffer to lead her or escort her, she left the kitchen and
went to the

top of the stairs. He called after her. Another attempt at persuasion,
no doubt; or

some more fancy story-telling. But she ignored him this time, and
started down the

stairs.

THREE

Katya had a little more of her story still to tell.

"'My life is worth nothing,' the Duke had told the Devil's wife. He, who
had

led armies, and triumphed in his crusades against the infidel; now
found his life

was at an end. And why? Because he chased and killed what he took
to be a goat?'

"'It was an accident!' he said, his fury at the injustice of this suddenly
getting the better of him. 'I demand to be seen by some higher judge
than you.'

"'There is only one higher,' Lilith replied. 'And that's my husband.'

Page 138

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"The Duke met her cold gaze, the profundity of his terror
paradoxically

making him brave.'

"There is a God in Heaven,' he said.â

"Is there now?' said Lilith. 'Are you certain? I saw him only once, the day

He made me. Since then He has never shown his face. This is the Devil's Country,

Goga. My Lord Lucifer rules here. Or in his absence, me. I doubt your God will

stretch out his hand to save your soul.â

"Then I shall ride out of here,' the Duke replied.â

"You saw what happened to your comrade. I'll do the same to you, before you

reach your horse. I'll have you wailing like a baby at my feet.â

"Goga wasn't a stupid man. He knew there was no use in contradicting the

woman. He'd already seen one of his men horribly slaughtered by her. He would surely

follow if he attempted to escape. All he could do was throw himself upon Lilith's

mercy.â

"He went down on his knees, and composing himself as best he could, he

addressed her:â

"Please, gentle lady, listen to me.â

"I'm listening.â

"I have lost children of my own, all six of them dead by the plague. And my

wife the same way. I know the pain you are suffering, and I'm sick that I was its

cause. But what's done is done. I made a mistake, that I bitterly regret. But how

can I take it back? Had I known I was on your husband's land I would not even have

hunted here.†

"Lilith looked at him for a long while, assessing the worth of his appeal.

"Well, hereafter, my lord,' she said finally, 'it is my pleasure that you and your

men will hunt here always.†

‡Another bitter breath up out of Hell to accompany these words. The woman's

long hair rose up around her body, a few of its strands grazing Goga's upturned

face.†

"Get back on your horses, hunters,' Lilith said. 'Return to your hunt.

There are boar in the thicket, waiting to be driven out. There are birds in the

trees, ready to be shot while they sing. Kill them at will, as it pleases you to do

so. There will be no charge for your sport.†

"The Duke was astonished to hear this mild invitation, after all that had

just taken place, and thinking perhaps his plea for clemency had carried some weight

with Lilith, he very slowly got to his feet, thanking her.†

"It's most kind of you,' he said, 'to invite me to hunt. And perhaps another day I will come back here and accept your invitation. But today my heart is

heavy-†

"As well it might be,† the woman replied. "So I think instead I will return to the Fortress and-†

"No,' she said, raising her hand. 'You will not return to the fortress. You

will hunt.†

"I could not, madam. Really, I could not.†

"Sir,' she replied, with a little inclination of her head. 'You

misunderstood me. You have no choice. You will hunt, and you will go on hunting,

until you find my son a second time, and bring him back to me.†

"I don't understand.†

"A second time.†

"She pointed to the corpse of the goat-child, which lay in its cooling blood. Her hair drifted over the sprawled cadaver, lightly touching the boy's chest

and stomach and private parts. Much to the Duke's astonishment the child responded

to his mother's caresses. As the hair touched his chest his lungs drew a little

breath, and his penis-which was disproportionately large for one his

age-grew

steely.î

"Take your sword out of him,' Lilith instructed the Duke.î

"But the Duke was too terrified at this scene of infernal resurrection to go

near the boy. He kept his distance, filling his breeches in fear.î

"You men are all the same!' Lilith said contemptuously. "You find it easy

enough to drive the sword in, but when it comes to taking it out you can't bring

yourself to do it.î

"She stepped into the puddle of her son's blood, and reached to take hold of

the sword. The boy's eyes flickered open as he felt his mother's hand upon the

pommel. Then he lifted his hands and caught hold of the blade with his bare palms,

Page 139

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

almost as though he were attempting to keep her from extracting it. Still she

pulled, and it slowly came out of him.î

"Slowly, mama,' the goat-boy said, his tone almost lascivious. 'It hurts mightily.'î

"Does it, child?' Lilith said, twisting the blade in the wound as though to

perversely increase her child's distress. He threw back his head, still looking at

her from the bottom of his eyes, his lips drawn back from his little, pointed teeth.

And this?' she said, turning the blade the other way. 'Does this bring you agony?'

"Yes, Mama!"

"She twisted it the other way. And this?"

"Finally, it was too much for the child. He let out a hissing sound, and

spat from his erection several spouts of semen-Its sharp stink made the Duke's eyes

sting.

"Lilith waited until the boy had finished ejaculating, then she drew out the

sword. The goat-boy sank back on the wet earth, with a look of satisfaction on his

face.

"Thank you, mama,' he said, as though well pleased by what had just

happened.

"The wound on his belly was already closing up, the Duke saw. It was as

though it were being knitted by agile and invisible fingers. So too the wounds on

his hands, incurred when he had seized the blade. In a matter of perhaps half a

minute the goat-boy was whole again."

"So if the child wasn't dead," Todd said, "why was the Duke guilty of murdering him?"

Katya shook her head. "He'd committed the crime. The fact that the boy was

an immortal was academic. He'd murdered the child, and had to be punished for it."

Todd's gaze went again to the trees where the Duke and his men had disappeared, picturing the look of hope that had appeared on the men's faces when

they'd heard the sound of the child's cries. Now all that made sense. No wonder

they'd ridden off so eagerly. They were still hoping to find the boy, and earn their

release from the Devil's Country.

A wave of claustrophobia came up over Todd. This was not the limitless

landscape it had first appeared to be: it was a prison, and he wanted to be free of

it. He turned, and turned again, looking for some crack in the illusion, however

small. But he could find none. Despite the immensity of the vistas in all

directions, and the height of heavens above him, he might as well have been locked

in a cell.

His breath had quickened; his hands were suddenly clammy. "Which way's the

door?" he asked Katya.

"You want to leave? Now?"

"Yes, now."

"It's just a story," she said. "No it's not. I saw the Duke. We both saw him."

"It's all part of the show," Katya said, with a dismissive little shrug.

"Calm down. There's no harm going to come to us. I've been down here hundreds of

times and nothing ever happened to me."

"You saw the Duke here before?"

"Sometimes. Never as close as we saw today, but there are always hunters."

"Well ask yourself: why are there always hunters? Why is there always an

eclipse?"

"I don't know. Why do you always do the same thing in a movie every time it

runs-"

"So things are exactly the same, every time you come here, like a movie?"

"Not exactly the same, no. But the sun's always like that: three-quarters

covered. And the trees, the rocks...even the ships out there." She pointed to the

ships. "It's always the same ships. They never seem to get very far."

"So it's not like a movie," Todd said. "It's more like time's been frozen."

She nodded. "I suppose it is," she said. "Frozen in the walls."

"I don't see any walls."

"They're there," Katya said, "it's just a question of where to look. How to

look. Trust me."

"You want me to trust you," Todd said, "then get me out of here."

"I thought you were enjoying yourself."

"The pleasure went out of it a while back," Todd said. He grabbed her arm,

Page 140

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

hard. "Come on," he said. "I want to get out."

She shook herself free of him. "Don't touch me that way," she said, her expression suddenly fierce. "I don't like it." She pointed past him, over his right

shoulder. "The door's over there."

He looked back He could see no sign of an opening. Just more of the Devil's

Country.

And now, to make matters worse, he once again heard the sound of hooves.

"Oh Christ..."

He glanced back towards the trees. The Duke and his men were riding towards

them, empty-handed.

"They're coming back to interrogate us," Todd said. "Katya! Did you hear me?"

We need to get the hell out of here."

Katya had seen the horsemen, but she didn't seem overly unnerved. She

watched them approaching without moving. Todd, meanwhile, made his way in the

general direction of the door; or at least where she had indicated it stood. He

scanned the place, looking for some fragment-the corner of the doorframe, the

handle, the keyhole-to help him locate it. But there was nothing.

Having no other choice he simply walked across the stony ground, his hands

extended in front of him. After proceeding perhaps six strides, the empty air in

front of him suddenly became solid, and his hands flattened against cold, hard tile.

The instant he made contact, the illusion of the painters' trompe l'oeil was broken.

He could not believe he had been so easily deceived. What had looked like infinite,

penetrable reality two strides before now looked absurdly fake: stylish marks on

pieces of antiquated tile, plastered on a wall. How could his eyes have been misled

for an instant?

Then he looked back over his shoulder, to call Katya over, and the illusion

in which she stood was still completely intact-the expanse of open ground between

where they stood and the galloping horsemen apparently a quarter mile or more, the

trees beyond them twice that, the sky limitless above. Illusion, he told himself,

all illusion. But it meant nothing in the face of the trick before him, which

refused to bow to his doubt. He gave up trying to make it concede, and instead

turned back to the wall. His hands were still upon it, the tiles still laid out

under his palms. Which direction did the door lie in?

"Right or left?" he called to Katya.

"What?"

"The door! Is it to the right or left?"

She took her eyes off the riders, and scanned the wall he was clinging to.

"Left," she said, casually.

"Hurry then-"

"They didn't find the child."

"Forget about them!" he told her.

If she was attempting to impress him with her fearlessness she was doing a

poor job. He was simply irritated. She'd shown him the way the room worked for God's

sake; now it was time to get out.

"Come on!" he cried.

As he called to her he moved along the wall, a step to his left, then

another step, keeping his palms flat to the tiles every inch of the way, as though

defying them to play some new trick or other. But it seemed that as long as he had

his hands on the tiles-as long as he could keep uppermost in his mind the idea that

this was a painted world, it could not start its trickeries afresh. And on the

third, or was it fourth? step along the wall his extended hand found the door-jamb.

He breathed out a little sigh of relief. The door-jamb was right there under his

hand. He moved his palm over it onto the door itself which, like the jamb, was tiled

so that there was no break in the illusion. He fumbled for the handle, found it and

tried to turn it.

On the other side, Tammy had found her way along the passageway and chosen

that precise moment to turn the handle in the opposite direction.

"Oh Jesus-" Todd said. "It's locked."

"You hear that?" Tammy gasped. "That's Todd? Todd!"

"Yeah it's me. Who's this?"

"Tammy. It's Tammy Lauper. Are you turning the handle?"

"Yeah."

"Well let go of it. Let me try."

Todd let go. Tammy turned the handle. Before she opened the door she glanced

Page 141

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

back at Zeffer. He was still one flight up the stairs, staring out of the window.

"The dead..." she heard him say.

"What about them?"

"They're all around the house. I've never seen them this close before. They

know there are people passing back and forth through the door, that's why."

"Do I open the door? Todd's on the other side."

"Are you sure it's Todd?"

"Yes it's Todd."

Hearing his name called, Todd impatiently yelled from the other side. "Yes,

it's me. And Katya. Will you please open the fucking door?"

Tammy's hands were sweaty, and her muscles weary; the handle slid through

her palm. "I can't open it. You try."

Todd struggled with the handle from his side, but what had seemed as though

it was going to be the easiest part of the procedure (opening the door) was proving

the most intractable. It was almost as though the room didn't want him to leave; as

though it wanted to hold on to him for as long as possible, to exercise the greatest

amount of influence over him; to addict him, second by second, sight by sight.

He glanced back over his shoulder. Katya was staring up at the sky, moving

her hands down over her body, as though she was luxuriating in the curious

luminosity of this enraptured world. For a moment he imagined her naked, cradled in

the heavenly luminescence, but he caught himself in the midst of the fantasy. It was

surely just another of the room's tricks to keep him from departing. The damn place

probably had a thousand such sleights-of-mind: sexual, philosophical, murderous.

He closed his eyes hard against the seductions of the Country and put his

head against the door. The tile was clammy; like a living thing. "Tammy?" he said.

"Are you still here?"

"Yes?"

"When I count three, I want you to push. Got it?"

"Got it."

"Okay. Ready?"

"Ready."

"One. Two. Three!"

She pushed. He pulled. And the door fell open, presenting Todd with one of

the odder juxtapositions he'd witnessed in his life. In the hallway on the other

side of the door stood a woman who looked as though she'd gone several rounds with a

heavy-weight boxer. There were bloody scratches on her face, neck and arms; her hair

and clothes were in disarray. In her eyes she had a distinctly panicked look.

He recognized her instantly. She was the leader of his Fan Club, a woman

called Tammy Lauper. Yes! The missing Tammy Lauper! How the hell had she got up

here? Never mind. She was here, thank God.

"I thought something terrible had happened to you," Lauper said.

"Give it time," he quipped.

Behind him, he heard the horsemen approaching. He glanced around, calling

again to Katya.

"Hurry up, will you?"

When he returned his gaze to Tammy it was clear that she'd taken in, as best

her disbelief would allow, the incredible sight over his shoulder. Her eyes were

wide with astonishment, her jaw slack.

"So this is what it looks like."

"Yes," he said to her. "This is it."

Tammy threw a look back at a stooped, older man standing on the stairs

behind her. He looked almost incapacitated with fear. But unlike Tammy, whose

expression was that of someone who had never seen anything like this before, it was

Todd's sense that her companion knew exactly what he was seeing, and would have

liked nothing better than to have turned right there and fled.

Then Todd heard Katya calling from behind him, naming the man.

"Zeffer," she said, the word freezing the man where he stood.

"Katya..." he said, inclining his head.

Katya came up behind Todd, pressing him aside in order to cross over the

threshold. She pointed at the trespasser as she did so.

"I told you never to come back into this house!" she yelled at Zeffer.

"Didn't I?"

He flinched at this, though it was difficult to believe she posed much

physical threat to him.

Page 142

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

She summoned him down the stairs. "Come here," she said. "You worthless

piece of shit! I said: come here!"

Before he could obey her, Tammy intervened. "It's not his fault," she said.

"I was the one who asked him to bring me down here."

Katya gave her a look of complete contempt; as though anything she might

have to contribute to the conversation was worthless.

"Whoever the hell you are," she said, "this is none of your business."

She pushed Tammy aside and reached out to catch hold of Zeffer. He had

dutifully approached at her summons, but now avoided her grasp. She came after him

anyway, striking his chest with the back of her hand, a solid blow; and another; and

another. As she struck him she said: "I told you to stay outside, didn't I?"

The blows were relatively light, but they carried strength out of all

proportion to their size. They knocked the breath out of him, for one thing, and

she'd come back with a second blow before he'd drawn breath from the first, which

quickly weakened him. Tammy was horrified, but she didn't want to interfere, in case

she simply made the matter worse. Nor was her attention entirely devoted to the

sight of Todd, or to the assault upon Zeffer. Her gaze was increasingly claimed by

the sight visible through the open door. It was astonishing. Despite the fact that

Zeffer had told her the place was an illusion, her eyes and her mind were wholly

enamoured by what she saw: the rolling forest, the rocks with their thickets of

thorn bushes, the delta and the distant sea. It all looked so real. And what was

that?

Some creature that looked like a feathered lizard, its coxcomb yellow and

black, scuttled into view, and out again.

It halted, seeming to look back through the door at her: a beast that

belonged in some book of medieval monsters than in such proximity to her.

She glanced back at Zeffer, who was still being lectured by Katya. With the

door open, and the visions beyond presented to her, she saw no reason not to step

over the threshold, just for a moment, and see the place more plainly. After all,

she was protected against its beguilements. She knew it was a

beautiful lie, and as

long as she remembered that, then it couldn't do her any harm, could it?

The only thing in the landscape that was real was Todd, and it was to him

that she now went, crossing the dirt and the windblown grass to go to him. The

feathered reptile lowered its coxcomb as she crossed the ground, and slunk away,

disappearing into a crack between two boulders. But Todd wasn't watching

animal-life. He had his eyes on several horsemen who were approaching along a road

that wound through a dense stand of trees. They were approaching at speed, kicking

up clods of earth as they came. Were they real, Tammy wondered, or just part of the

landscape? She wasn't sure, nor was she particularly eager to put the question to

the test.

Yet with every passing second she was standing in this world the more she

felt the power of the room to unknit her doubts. She felt its influence seeping

through her sight and her skin into her mind and marrow. Her head grew giddy, as

though she'd downed two or three glasses of wine in quick succession.

It wasn't an unpleasant sensation by any means, especially given the

extreme

discomfort of the last few hours. She felt almost comforted by the room; as though

it understood how she'd suffered of late, and was ready to soothe her hurts and

humiliations away. It would distract her with its beauty and its strangeness; if she

would only trust it for a while.

"Tammy..." she heard Zeffer say behind her. His voice was weak, and the

effect his summons had on her was inconsequential. She didn't even acknowledge it.

She just let her eyes graze contentedly on the scene before her; the trees, the

horsemen, the road, the rocks.

Soon, she knew, the riders would make a turn in that road, and it would be

interesting to see how their image changed when they were no longer moving in

profile, but were coming towards her.

She glanced back over her shoulder. It wasn't far to the door: just a few

yards. Her eyes didn't even focus on whatever was going on in the passageway. It

seemed very remote from her at that moment.

She looked back towards the horsemen. They had turned the corner in the

road, and were now coming directly towards the spot where Todd and she stood. It was

the oddest visual spectacle she'd ever witnessed, to see them growing larger as they

approached, like illustrations emerging from a book. The landscape around them

seemed to both recede and advance at the same moment as they approached, its motion

Page 143

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

throwing them forward as the ground beneath their horses drew back like a retreating

wave. It was an utterly bewildering spectacle, but its paradoxical beauty enthralled

her. All thought of Zeffer's summons, or indeed his safety, were forgotten: it was

as though she was watching a piece of film for the first time, not knowing how the

mechanism worked upon her. She felt Todd throw her a sideways glance. "Time to go,"

he said.

The earth beneath their feet reverberated as the horsemen approached. They'd

be at the door in thirty or forty seconds. "Come on," he said.

"Yes..." she murmured. "I'm coming."

She didn't move. It wasn't until Todd caught hold of her arm and pulled her

back towards the door that she eventually obeyed the instruction and went. Even then

she kept looking back over her shoulder, astonished. "I don't believe what I'm

seeing," she said.

"It's all real. Trust me on that," he said. "They can do you harm." They had

reached the threshold now, and she reluctantly allowed herself to be coaxed back

over it and into the passageway. She was amazed at the speed with which the room had

caught her attention; made itself the center of her thoughts.

Even now, it was still difficult to focus her attention on anything but the

scene beyond the door, but finally she dragged her eyes away from the approaching

horsemen and sought out Zeffer.

He had fallen to his knees three or four yards from the door, putting up no

defense against Katya's assault.

"I told you, didn't I?" she said, slapping his head. "I never wanted to see

you in this house ever again. You understand me? Ever again."

"I'm sorry," he said, his head bowed. "I just brought-"

"I don't care who you brought. This house is forbidden to you."

"Yes...I know."

His acquiescence did nothing to placate her. The reverse, in fact: it seemed

to inflame her. She kicked him. "You revolt me," she said.

He bent over, as though to present a smaller target to her. She pushed him,

hard, and he fell. She moved in to kick him again, aiming for his face, but at that

moment Tammy saw what she was about to do, and let out a cry of protest.

"Leave him alone!" she said.

Katya turned. "What?"

"You heard me. Leave him alone!"

Katya's beauty was disfigured by the naked contempt on her face. She was

breathing heavily, and her face was flushed.

"I'll do what it suits me to do in my own house," she said, her lip curling.

And no fat, ugly bitch like you is going to tell me otherwise."

Tammy knew plenty about Katya Lupi by now, of course; her intimidating

reputation went before her. But at that moment, seeing Zeffer lying on the floor,

and hearing what the woman had just said, any trace of intimidation was burned away

by a blaze of anger. Even the glories of the Devil's Country were forgotten at that

moment.

She walked straight towards Katya and pushed her hard, laying her hands

against the bitch's little breasts to do so. Katya was clearly not used to being

manhandled. She came back at Tammy in an instant.

"Don't you dare touch me!" she shrieked. Then she back-handed Tammy; a

clean, wide strike.

Tammy fell back, the metallic tang of blood in her mouth. There were three

sickening heartbeats when she feared the force of Katya's blow was going to knock

her unconscious. Darkness pulsed at the corners of her vision. But she was

determined not to be floored by one blow, even if it did have something more than

ordinary human force behind it, as she suspected it did.

She reached out for something to steady her, and her hand found the

door-jamb. As she caught hold of it, she glanced back over her shoulder, remembering

her proximity to the strange beauty of the Devil's Country. But the power of the

room's illusion had been momentarily knocked from her head. The walls were simply

covered in tiles now. There were trees and rocks and a painted river on those tiles,

but none of it was so finely rendered that it could have been mistaken for reality.

The only part of the scene before her that was real was Todd, who was still

lingering at the threshold. Apparently he could see what Tammy could not because at

that moment he threw himself over the threshold like a man in fear of something

coming close on his heels. He caught hold of the doorhandle, and started to pull the

Page 144

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

door closed, but as he did so Katya came back into view and blocked the door with

her foot.

"Don't close it!" she told Todd.

Todd obeyed her. He let go of the handle. The door struck Katya's leg and

bounced open again.

Now the machinations of the room began to work on Tammy afresh. The gloomy

air seethed, and the shapes of four horsemen appeared out of the murk, still riding

towards the door.

The leader-the Duke, Tammy thought, this is the Duke-pulled hard on the

reins to slow his mount. The animal made a din, as though its primitive gaze was

failing to make sense of what it was ahead of it. Rather than advance

any further it

came to a panicked halt, throwing up clods of dirt as it did so. Goga jumped from

the saddle, shouting a number of incomprehensible orders back at his men, who had

also brought their animals to a stop. They proceeded to dismount. There were

whispers of superstitious doubt between the men: plainly whatever they were

witnessing (the door, the passageway) they could make little or no sense of it. That

fact didn't slow their advance, however. They dutifully followed their leader

towards the door, swords drawn.

By now Tammy had recovered sufficiently to grab hold of Todd's arm and pull

him back from the threshold.

"Come away," she urged him.

He looked round at her. She was probably more familiar with his face, and

with his limited palette of expressions, than she was with her own. But she'd never

seen the look of stupefaction he wore right now. The veins at his temples were

throbbing, his mouth was slack; his blood-shot eyes seemed to have difficulty

focusing on her.

She tugged harder on his arm, in the hope of shaking him out of his stupor.

Behind him she could see the horsemen approaching the door, their step more cautious

now that they were almost at the threshold. Having stopped the door from being

closed Katya had stepped away from it, leaving Todd the closest of them all to the

horsemen. So close, in fact, that had the Duke so chosen, he could have lunged from

where he stood, and killed Todd with a single stroke.

He did not do so, however. He hung back from the door, eyeing it with

suspicion and awe. Though none of the light from the hallway seemed to illuminate

the world on the other side of the doorway, Tammy could see the man's face quite

clearly: his severely angular features, his long, braided beard, black shot through

with streaks of gray; his dark, heavy-lidded eyes. He was by no means as beautiful

as Todd had once been, but there was a gravitas in his physiognomy which Todd's

corn-fed charm could never have approached. No doubt he was responsible for all

manner of crimes-in such a landscape as he'd ridden who would not lay claim to their

share of felonies?-but in that moment, in the midst of a dark journey of her own,

Tammy would have instinctively preferred the eloquence of this face for company than

Todd's easy beauty.

Indeed, if she had ever been in love with Todd Pickett-which by many definitions she had-she fell out of love with him at that moment, comparing his face

with that of Duke Goga, and finding it wanting.

That was not to say that she didn't want Todd safe from this place; from the

house and all its inhabitants, especially Katya. So she hauled on his arm again,

yelling for him to get away from the door, and this time her message got through to

him.

Todd retreated, and as he did so Katya caught hold of Zeffer by the hair and

lifted him up. Tammy was too concerned with reclaiming Todd from the threshold to do

anything to save Zeffer. And Zeffer in turn did nothing to save himself. He simply

let the woman he had adored pick him up, and with the same nearly supernatural

strength Tammy herself had felt just moments before, Katya pitched Zeffer through

the open door.

The horsemen were waiting on the other side, swords at the ready.

Only now, as he stumbled across the ground before them, did Zeffer

raise his

arms to protect himself against the swordsmen. Whether the Duke took this harmless

motion as some attempt at aggression, and reacted to protect himself, or whether he

simply wanted to do harm Tammy would never know. The Duke lifted his sword and

brought it down in a great swooping arc that cut through the meat of Zeffer's right

hand, taking off all four of his fingers, and the top half of his thumb. Blood

spurted out from the wounds, and Zeffer let out a cry that was one part disbelief to

Page 145

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

two of agony. He stared at his maimed hand for a moment, then he turned from his

mutilator and stumbled back towards the door.

For an instant, he lifted his eyes, and his eyes met Tammy's. They had a

moment only to look at one another. Then Duke Goga came at Zeffer again and drove

his sword through the middle of his back.

There was a terrible cracking sound, as the blade cracked Zeffer's

breastbone and then the point emerged from the middle of his chest.

Zeffer threw back his head, and caught hold of the edge of the door with his

unmaimed hand. He had his eyes fixed on Tammy as he did so, as though he was drawing

the power to do whatever he was planning to do from her. There was a long moment

when in fact he did nothing; only teetered on the threshold, his eyelids growing

lazy. Then-summoning one last Herculean effort of will-he gave Tammy a tiny smile

and closed the door in her face.

It was like being woken from a dream. One moment Tammy had been staring into

Zeffer's stricken face, while the men closed in on him from behind, and the sky

seethed overhead. The next the door had shut this terrible vision out, and she was

back in the little hallway with Todd at her side.

The sight of Zeffer's execution had momentarily distracted Katya from any

further mischief. She was simply staring at the door as though she could see through

it to the horror on the other side.

Tammy didn't give her a chance to snap out of the trance. She started up the

stairs, pulling Todd after her.

"Christ..." Todd muttered to himself. "Christ oh Christ oh Christ..."

Five stairs up, Tammy chanced a backward glance, but Katya was still standing in front of the door.

What was she thinking, Tammy wondered. What have I done? Did a woman like

that ever think-ewhat have I done'? With Zeffer gone, she would be alone in

Coldheart Canyon. Alone with the dead. Not a pretty prospect.

Perhaps she was regretting. Just a little.

And while she regretted, (if regretting was what she was doing) Tammy

continued to haul Todd after her up the stairs.

Six steps now; seven, eight, nine.

Now the escapees were on the half-landing. Through the window off to their

left Tammy could see the sight that had held Zeffer's attention just minutes before:

the occupants of Coldheart Canyon pressing against the glass.

Why didn't they simply break in, she wondered? They weren't, after all,

insubstantial. They had weight, they had force. If they wanted to get in so badly,

why didn't they simply break the glass or splinter the doors?

The question went from her head the next instant, driven out by a wail of

demand from below.

"Todd?"

It was Katya, of course. She had finally stirred from her fugue state and

was coming up the stairs after them. Speaking in her sweetest voice.
Her come-hither

voice.

"Todd, where are you going?"

Tammy felt nauseous. Katya could still do them harm. She still had
power

over Todd and she knew it. That was why she put on that little girl
questioning

voice.

"Todd?" Katya said again. "Wait, darling."

If she let go of him, Tammy guessed, he would obey Katya's request.
And then

they'd be lost. Katya would never let him go. She'd kill him rather
than let him

escape her a second time.

There wasn't much advice Tammy could give to Todd except: "Don't
look back."

He glanced at her, his expression plaintive. It made her feel as though
she

were leading a child rather than a grown man.

"We can't just leave her here," he said.

"After what she just did!"

"Don't listen to her," Katya said, her voice suddenly a siren-song, the

little-girl lightness erased in favor of something more velvety. "She
just wants you

for herself."

Todd frowned.

"You can't leave me, Todd."

And then more softly still: "I won't let you leave me."

"Just remember what she did down there," Tammy said to Todd.

Page 146

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"Zeffer was a nuisance," Katya said. She was getting closer, Tammy knew; her

voice had dropped to a sultry murmur. "I never loved him, Todd. You know that. He

hung around causing trouble. Listen to me. You don't want to go with this woman.

Look at her, then look at me. See what a choice you're making."

Tammy half-expected Todd to obey Katya's instruction. But Todd simply

studied the stairs as they climbed, which under the circumstances was a minor

triumph. Perhaps he still had the will-power in him to resist Katya, Tammy thought.

He wasn't her object yet.

Even so the murdering bitch wasn't ready to give up.

"Todd?" Katya said, now casual, as though none of this was of any great

significance. "Will you turn round for a moment? Just for a moment? Please. I want

to see your face before you go. That's not asking much, now is it? Just

one more

time. I can't bear it. Please. Todd...I...can't...bear it."

Oh Lord, Tammy thought, she's turning on the tears. She knew how potent a

well-timed flood of tears could be. Her sister had always been very quick to turn on

the waterworks when she wanted something; and it had usually done the trick.

"Please, my love..."

It was almost believable; the words catching in her throat, the soft sob.

"...don't go. I won't be able to live without you."

They were still a few strides from the front door. Then, once they were out,

they had to get along the pathway and onto the street. Somehow she doubted Katya's

power extended far beyond the limits of the house. The Canyon might have been hers

once upon a time, but she'd lost control of it in the decades since her heyday. Now

it belonged to the ghosts and the animals, and the bestial offspring of both.

Still coaxing Todd after her, Tammy made her way across the hallway to the

front door.

Behind them, Katya kept up her tearful appeals: declarations of love,

interspersed with sobs. Then more appeals for him to turn around and

look at her.

"You don't want to go," she called to Todd, "you know you don't. Especially

with her. Lord, Todd, look at her. You really want that?"

Finally, Tammy snapped. "How the hell do you know what he wants, bitch?" she

said, turning to look round at the woman on their heels.

"Because we're soul-mates," Katya said.

Her eyes were swollen and red, Tammy noted with some satisfaction, and there

were tears pouring down her face. Her mascara was running down her pale cheeks in

two black rivulets. "He knows it's true," Katya went on. "We've suffered the same

way. Haven't we, Todd? Remember how you said it was like I was reading your mind?

And I said it was because we were the same, deep down? Remember that?"

"Ignore her," Tammy said. They were no more than three strides from the

front door.

But Katya-realizing she was close to losing-had one last trick up her sleeve. One final power-play. "If you step out of this house," she said to Todd,

"then it's over between us. Do you understand me? If you stay-oh, if you stay, my

darling-then I'm yours. I'm yours body and soul-I mean it: body and

soul. But if you

go it'll be as though you never existed."

Finally, something she said carried enough weight to stop Todd in his tracks.

"Ignore her," Tammy said. "Please."

"You know I can do that," Katya went on.

Todd turned, and looked back at her, which was exactly what Tammy was

praying he wouldn't do. Katya was standing in the darkness close to the top of the

stairs but the shadows did not conceal the fierce brilliance of her stare. Her eyes

seemed to flicker in the murk, as though there were flames behind them.

Now she had succeeded in making him look at her again, she softened her

tone. She certainly had quite a repertoire, Tammy thought. First demands, then pleas

and siren-songs; then tears and threats. Now what?

"I know what you're thinking..." she said.

Ah, mind reading.

"...you're thinking that you've got a life out there. And it's calling you back"

Tammy was puzzled. This sounded like a self-defeating argument. "You're

thinking you want to be back in the spotlight, where you belong..."

While Katya talked, Tammy made a momentous decision. She let go of Todd's

hand. She'd done all that she could. If after all this Todd decided that he wanted

Page 147

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

to turn back and give himself to the wretched woman, then there was nothing more

Tammy could do about it. He was a lost cause.

She crossed swiftly to the front door, and opened it. The first tug was a

little difficult. Then the door swung open easily, majestically. There were no

ghosts on the threshold, only the refreshing night air, sweetened by the scent of

night-blooming jasmine.

Behind her, in the house, Katya was finishing her argument. "The fact is,"

she said, "there's nothing out there for you now. Do you understand me, Todd?"

There's nothing."

Tammy stepped out onto the front steps. She looked back at Todd, in time to

catch a look of pitiful confusion on his face. He literally didn't know which way to

turn.

"Don't look at me," Tammy said to him. "It's your choice."

His expression became still more pained. That wasn't what he wanted to hear.

"Look, you're a grown man," Tammy said. "If you want to stay with her,

knowing what she's capable of, then you stay. I hope you'll be very happy together."

"Todd..." Katya murmured.

She stepped out of the shadows now, choosing her moment, as ever,

beautifully. The demonic Katya, the woman who'd thrashed Zeffer then thrown him to

Goga, had vanished completely. In her place was a sad, gentle woman-or the

appearance of such-who opened her arms to Todd like a loving mother.

"Come back to me," she said.

He made the tiniest nod of his head and Tammy's heart sank.

He started to turn his back on the door, but as he did so there was a sudden

and furious eruption of noise from the depths of the house. Somebody in the Devil's

Country was beating on the door: a furious tattoo.

It came at the perfect moment. At the sound from below Todd seemed to snap

out of his mesmerized state and instead of heading for Katya's open arms he began to

retreat towards the door.

"You know what?" he said to Katya. "I can't take this place any longer. I'm

sorry. I've got to get out."

Katya flew at him, her arms outstretched, her eyes wide. "No!" she cried. "I

want you here!"

It was more than Todd could take. He backed away from her and stumbled out

over the step.

"Finally," Tammy said.

He grabbed hold of her hand. "Get me the fuck out of here," he said.

This time there was no hesitation in his voice, no turning back. They ran to

the gate and out into the street, not stopping for a moment. Tammy slammed the gate

loudly, not so much because she felt it would keep the bitch from following, but

because it made the point to the entire Canyon that they were indeed out of the

house and away.

"My car's up the road," she told Todd, though of course it was now three

days since she'd left it, and there was no guarantee it would still be sitting

there. And the keys; what about the keys? Had she left them in the ignition? She

thought she had; but she was by no means certain. So much had

happened to her in the

intervening time; she had no clear memory of what she'd done with the keys.

"I'm assuming you're going to come with me?" she said to Todd. He looked at

her blankly. "To the car," she said, for emphasis.

"Yes."

"It's up the street."

"Yes. I heard you."

"Well, shall we go then?"

He nodded, but he didn't move. His gaze had drifted back to the house.

Leaving him to stare, Tammy set off up the road to where she'd left the car. There

was neither moon nor stars in the sky; just a blanket of amber-tinted cloud. She

soon lost sight of Todd as she headed up the benighted road. Memories of her

night-journey through the place, with all its attendant miseries and hallucinations,

rose up before her, but she told herself to put them out of her head. She was going

to be out of this damn Canyon in a few minutes, long before it got back into her

mind again, and started its tricks.

The car, when she reached it, was unlocked. She opened the door and slipped

into the driver's seat, fumbling for the ignition. Yes! The keys were there. "Thank

you, God," she said, with a late show of piety.

Page 148

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

She turned on the engine, and switched on the headlights. They lit up the

whole street ahead. She put the car into gear and brought the car roaring around the

corner. Todd had wandered out into the middle of the road, and she could have

ploughed into him (which would have made an ignominious end to the night's

adventures) had he not stepped out of her way. But at least the distracted look had

gone from his face. When he got into the car there was a new and welcome urgency

about his manner. "We're out of here," he said.

"I thought for a moment that you were planning to stay."

"No...I was just thinking...about what a fool I'd been."

"Well stop thinking for a while," Tammy said. "It'll slow us down." She put

her foot down and they sped off down the winding street. About halfway down the

Canyon he said: "Do you think she's going to come after us?"

"No," Tammy said. "I don't think her pride would let her."

She had no sooner spoken than something sprang into the glare of the headlights. Todd let out a yelp of surprise, but Tammy knew in a heartbeat what it

was: one of the hybrids she'd encountered on the slopes. It was ugly, even by the

standards of its malformed breed: a loping, pasty thing with the flesh missing from

the lower half of its face, exposing a sickly rictus.

Tammy made no attempt to avoid striking the beast. Instead she drove

straight into it. The moment before it was struck the thing opened its lipless mouth

horribly wide, as though it thought it might scare the vehicle off. Then the front

of the car struck it, and its body rolled up onto the hood, momentarily sprawling

over the windshield. For a few seconds, Tammy was driving blind, with the face of

the beast grotesquely plastered against the glass. Then one of her more suicidal

swerves threw the thing off, leaving just a smudge of its pale yellow fluids on the

glass.

Very quietly Todd said: "What the fuck was that?"

"I'll tell you some other time," Tammy said. And leaving the explanation

there she proceeded down the winding road in uncontested silence, bringing them

finally to some anonymous but lamplit street, and so, out of the
entrails of

Coldheart Canyon, and back into the City of Angels.

PART SEVEN

THE A-LIST

ONE

In March of 1962 Jerry Brahms had bought a small two bedroom
apartment a

block or two within the gates of Hollywoodland, a neighborhood
created in the

twenties which encompassed a large parcel of land in the vicinity of
the Hollywood

sign. The house had cost him nineteen thousand seven hundred
dollars, a relatively

modest sum for a place so pleasantly situated. Back then, he'd still
indulged the

fantasy that one day he'd meet a soul-mate with whom he would one
day share the

house, but somehow his romantic entanglements had always ended
poorly, and despite

three attempts to bring someone in, the chemistry had failed
miserably, and each

time he'd sent the man to be on his way, and he'd ended up alone. He
no longer hoped

for an end to his solitude: even the most optimistic of the cancer
doctors who'd

seen him gave him at best a year. The tumor in his prostate was now
inoperable, and

spreading.

For all his love of the dreamy far-off days of Hollywood, Jerry was a practical man, and-at least when it came to himself-remarkably unsentimental. The

prospect of dying did not move him particularly one way or another: he was not

afraid of it, nor did he welcome the eventuality. It would simply happen- sooner

rather than later. Sometimes, when he got melancholy, he contemplated suicide, and

in preparation for such a moment had amassed a considerable number of sleeping

pills, sufficient, he felt sure, to do the job. But though he had very bad days now,

when the pain (and, for a man as fastidious as himself, the practical problems of

advanced bowel disorders) were so nearly overwhelming that he thought hard about

tying up all the loose ends of his life and simply knocking back the pills with a

strong Bloody Mary, somehow he could never bring himself to do it.

He had a sense of unfinished business, though he could not quite work out

what the business might be. His parents were long since dead, his only sibling, a

sister, also passed away, tragically young. Of his few friends there were few that

he cared to say anything of any great profundity to. If he slipped

away, there'd be

Page 149

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

little by way of tears: just some fighting over his collection of movie

memorabilia-which he'd never had evaluated, but was probably worth half a million

dollars at auction-and a few tear-sodden, bitchy remarks at Mickey's (his favorite

bar) when he was gone. Lord knows, he'd made enough of those kinds of remarks in his

life: he'd been the kind of queen with a feline answer to just about anything in his

heyday. But there was no joy in that kind of thing anymore. His style of queendom

was long out of fashion. He was a dinosaur with prostate cancer; soon to be extinct.

Lately he'd found that his condition made him vulnerable to every little

sadness that touched his world. The passing of Todd's dog, Dempsey, had left him in

tears all day, though he barely knew the animal. And then the death of Marco Caputo:

such a senseless waste of life. He hadn't ever been close friends with Caputo, but

on those few occasions when he'd met the man, Caputo had always been polite and

professional, rare enough in these days of mediocrity.

The funeral had not done justice to the man, in Jerry's opinion. It had been

small (there were a couple of family members in from Chicago, but they looked as

though they were more interested in what his will would say than in mourning their

brother). Todd, of course, was not on hand, though Maxine was there as his

representative. Jerry took the opportunity to ask her how much longer she thought

the stalker business would be going on for. Were the police trying to catch this

woman, and prosecute her, or was poor Todd just going to have to sit it out? Maxine

said she didn't know. She wouldn't be dealing with Todd's affairs for very much

longer, she told him: it was a waste of time and energy.

The conversation, the tiny, disinterested congregation, the coffin and the

thought of its unviewable contents, all sent Jerry back home to his apartment in a

blacker mood than usual. But even so, even on a day when it seemed that all decency

and all hope had gone from the world, he found it impossible to take his stash of

pills and finish the business.

Why, for God's sake? Something nagged at him; that was all he knew.

Something told him: wait, just a little longer.

"It's not over," the opera-queens of his acquaintance used to say, "'til the

fat lady sings."

Well, somewhere deep in his soul, he knew that the fat woman still had an

aria up her sleeve.

So he kept on living, which was often a wearisome business, all the while

waiting for whatever it was that was nagging at him to make itself apparent.

Finally, on the night of March 31st, it did.

The circumstances were peculiar: he had a dream so powerful that it woke

him. This in itself was odd, because he usually went to bed with a couple of

scotches to wash down his sleeping pills, and as a consequence seldom woke.

But he woke tonight, and the dream he'd dreamed was crystal clear.

He had dreamed that he was sitting on the toilet, of all places, in a state

of agonizing constipation (which was in his waking life a consequence of the

pain-killers his doctor prescribed). As he sat there he realized that there were

wooden boards on the floor of his toilet, not tiles as there were in life, and the

cracks between the boards were so wide that he could see right down into the

apartment below. Except that it wasn't another apartment, it was-in the strange

logic of this dream-another house. Nor was it just any house. It was Katya's dream

palace that was spread below him. And as he realized this, the gaps between the

boards grew wider, so that he dropped down between them, slowly, as though he were

feather-light.

And there he was, in Katya's house, in Coldheart Canyon. He pulled up his

pants and looked around.

The dream palace was in a state of considerable disrepair. The windows were

broken, and birds flew in and out, shitting on the fancy furniture. A coyote skulked

around in the kitchen, looking for scraps. And outside in the tree there were dozens

of little red-and-black-striped monkeys, chattering and screeching. This was not so

fanciful a detail as it might have seemed to someone who'd not known the house, as

he had, in its heyday. There had been monkeys there-escapees from Katya's private

menagerie; and for a while it seemed the climate suited them and they would

proliferate, but after a year or two some virus had decimated them.

Something about the place in its present condition made him want to

leave.

He knew, however, that he couldn't. Not without paying his respects to the lady of

the house. So rather than wait for her to show herself, he went to look for her,

Page 150

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

figuring that the sooner he found her the sooner he'd be released from this dream.

He started up the stairs. There were flies crawling on the ground beneath his feet,

so densely assembled and so sluggish that they refused to move as he ascended,

obliging him to crush them under his bare feet as he climbed.

The door to the master bedroom was open. He stepped inside, somewhat

tentatively. He had only been into the room once before. He remembered it as being

large; but here in his dream it was immense. The drapes were partially drawn, and

the sunlight that streamed between them was a curious color, almost lilac.

There was an enormous, but extremely plain, bed in the room. And sitting on

the bed was the only woman, besides his mother, whom Jerry had loved: Katya. She was

naked; or-more correctly stated-unclothed. Ninety percent of her body's surface was

covered with large snails, the common tortoiseshell variety that every gardener

curses. They were moving all over her skin. They were on her face, on her breasts

and belly, on her thighs and shins. Her hair was matted with their silvery trails,

and thirty or forty of them were arranged on her head like a grotesque crown. Her

legs were open, and they were also investigating the crevice between her thighs. As

is so often the case in dreams he saw all this with horrid particularity. Saw the

way their boneless grey-green bodies extended from their shells as they moved over

Katya's skin; their horns extending tentatively as they advanced, then retracting as

they encountered an obstacle-a nipple, an ear, the knuckle of her thumb-only to

stretch out again when they were certain there was no danger in the encounter.

Without speaking, Katya looked down and very delicately plucked one of the

creatures off her breast. Then she spread her legs a little wider, so that Jerry had

an even more intimate view of her private parts. He was no connoisseur, but even he

could see that there was a certain prettiness to the configuration of her labia; she

had the pussy of a young girl. Putting her hands down between her

legs she spread

her lips and delicately applied the snail she'd taken from her breast
the flesh

there.

Jerry watched with a kind of appalled fascination as it responded to
its new

perch, expanding its horns and investigating her.

Katya sighed. Her eyes fluttered closed. Then, suddenly, they opened
again.

When they did they were fixed on him, with startling fierceness.

"There you are, Jerry," she said, her voice full of the music he
remembered

from his childhood: the kind of bitter-sweet music by which he had
judged the voice

of every woman he'd met since.

Later he'd learned that silent movie stars had been notorious for
having

voices that precluded them from careers in the sound cinema: but
Katya had been one

of the exceptions to that rule. She had the slightest foreign inflection
(nothing

recognizable; just enough to add a certain poignancy to her
sentences); otherwise

she spoke with a beguiling elegance.

"I need help," she said to him. "Jerry, will you come to the house?
Please.

I am alone here. Utterly alone."

"What happened to Todd?" he said to her.

"He walked out on me."

"I can't believe that."

"Well it's true. He did. Are you going to choose between him and me?"

"No, of course not."

"He was just another empty shell, Jerry. There was no substance to him. And

now I'm alone, and it's worse than death."

His dream-self was about to get clever and ask her how she could possibly

know what death felt like, but then he thought better of asking her. Perhaps she did

indeed know. It wasn't beyond the bounds of possibility. He'd never understood

exactly how her life had worked, up there in the house in the Canyon, but he

suspected there were terrible secrets in that place.

"What do you want me to do?" he asked her.

"Come back up to the Canyon," she said.

That was the end of the dream, at least as he remembered it when he woke.

The image of her body covered with snails disgusted him, of course; especially its

sexual details. Had she conjured that, in dispatching this dream, or had he dug it

out of the recesses of his own sub-conscious? Whichever it was, it had

done its

duty: making certain he understood the pitiful state she was in.

All through the following day, as he went about his chores-down to the

market, back from the market, cooking himself chicken, eating the chicken, washing

Page 151

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

the plate from which he'd eaten the chicken, talking with Luis, who lived below,

about how the apartments all needed painting, and who was going to talk to the

manager because it had to be done soon; and so on, and so forth-through all of this

he kept thinking about the dream, and whether it was really trying to tell him

something or not. Out of the blue, he said to Luis: "Do you believe in dreams?"

Luis, who was a plump, amicable man who'd been in Christopher Street the

night of the Stonewall riots, in full drag, or so he claimed. "Like how?" he said.

"Give me an example."

"Like: you have a dream and it seems like it's telling you something."

"Oh yeah. I've had those."

"And were they?"

"Like I had a dream in which my mother told me to get out of this relationship I was in with a guy. I don't know if you met him. Ronnie?"

"I remember Ronnie."

"Well he was a sonofabitch. He used to beat me up, he'd get drunk on tequila

and beat me up."

"What's this got to do with the dream?"

"I told you: my mother said throw him out. In the dream. She said throw him

out or he'll kill you."

"What did you do?"

"I threw him out. I mean, I was ready to do it anyhow. The dream just confirmed what I'd been feeling."

"Did he just go?"

"No. He got physical, and we ended up fighting and-" Luis pulled up his

sleeve, exposing a six inch scar, pale against his mocha skin. "It got nasty."

"He did that?"

"We were fighting. And I fell on a glass-topped coffee-table. I needed sixteen stitches. By the time I got back from the hospital, the motherfucker had

gone. He'd taken all my shoes. And they weren't even his size."

"So you do believe in dreams?"

"Sure I believe. Why'd you want to know?"

"I'm trying to figure something out."

"Well, you want my opinion? Dreams can be useful doing that sometimes. Then

again, sometimes they're full of shit. It depends on the dream. You know how I know?

My Momma got really sick with pneumonia, and she was in the hospital in New York.

And I had this dream, and she was telling me she was fine, there was no need to

spend the money and fly out East, because she was going to get better. Next day, she

was dead."

Jerry went back to his apartment and thought about his dream some more, and

about what Luis had said. Gradually, it crept up on him why he was being so

reluctant about the decision. He was afraid that if he went up to (if he sided with

Katya, knowing her capacity for cruelty), it would be the end of him. He'd seen so

many movies in which the queen ended up dead in the second act, superfluous to the

real heart of the story. Wasn't that him? Hadn't he lived his life at the edge of

Katya's grand drama; never important enough to be at the heart of things? If events

in were indeed coming to an end-as it seemed they were-then what

was the likelihood

of his surviving to the final reel? Little or none.

And yet, if this was the inescapable truth of his life, then why fight it?

Why lock himself away in his little apartment, watching game-shows
and eating frozen

dinners for one, when the only drama he'd ever really been a part of
was playing out

to its conclusion twenty minutes' drive away? Wasn't that just
throwing more time

away: waste on waste?

Damn it, he would go. He'd obey the summons of the dream, and go
back to

Coldheart Canyon.

This course determined, he set about preparing himself for an
audience with

the Lady Katya. He chose something elegant to wear (she liked an
elegant man, she'd

heard him once say); his linen suit, his best Italian shoes, a silk tie
he'd bought

in Barcelona, to add just a touch of color to the otherwise subdued
ensemble. With

his clothes chosen, he showered and shaved and then-having worked
up a bit of a

sweat shaving-showered again.

It was late afternoon by the time he started to get dressed. It would
soon

be cocktail hour up in Coldheart Canyon. Tonight, at least, Katya

would not have to

drink alone.

Page 152

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

TWO

About the time Jerry Brahms had been waking up from his dream of Katya and

the snails-which is to say, just half an hour before dawn-Tammy and Todd were

slipping-'quietly, quietly,' she kept saying-into the little hotel where Tammy had

been staying. The last few days had provided Tammy with a notable range of unlikely

experiences but surely this was up there amongst the weirdest of them-tip-toeing

along the corridor of her two-star hotel with one of the most famous celebrities in

the world in tow, telling him to hush whenever his heel squeaked on a board.

"The room's chaos," she warned him as she let him in. "I'm not a very tidy

person..."

"I don't care what it looks like," Todd said, his voice so drained by

exhaustion it had no color left in it whatsoever. "I just want to piss and sleep."

He went directly into the bathroom, and without bothering to close the door,

unzipped and urinated like a racehorse, just as though the two of them had been

married for years and he didn't give a damn about the niceties. Telling herself she

shouldn't be taking a peek, Tammy did so anyway. Where was the harm? He was bigger

than Arnie, by a couple of sizes. He shook himself, wetting the seat (just like

Arnie) and went to the sink to wash, splashing water on his face in a half-hearted

fashion.

"I keep thinking-" he called through to her. "Can you hear me?"

"Yes, I can hear you fine."

"I keep thinking this is all a dream and I'm going to wake up." He turned

the water off and came to the door, towel in hand. He patted his wounded face dry,

very gently. "But then I think: if this was a dream when did it begin? When I first

saw Katya? Or when I first went up to Coldheart Canyon? Or when I woke up from the

operation, and it had all gone wrong?"

He tossed the towel onto the floor of the bathroom; something else Arnie

always did. It used to irritate the hell out of Tammy, forever chasing around after

her spouse, picking up stuff he'd dropped: towels in the bathroom, socks and

skid-marked underwear in the bedroom, food left out of the refrigerator, where the

flies could get at it. Why were those habits so hard for men to change? Why couldn't

they just pick things up and put them away in their proper place?

Todd was still talking about when his dream had begun. He'd decided it

started when Burrows put him under. "You're not serious?" she told him.

"Absolutely. All this..." he made an expansive gesture that took in the room

and Tammy "...is part of the same hallucination."

"Me, included?"

"Sure."

"Todd, you're being ridiculous." Tammy said. "You're not dreaming this, and

neither am I. We're awake. We're here."

"Here, I don't mind." Todd said, looking around the room. "I can take being

here. But Tammy, if this room exists then so does all that shit we saw up at Katya's

house. And I'm not ready to believe in that." He bit his nails as he spoke, pacing

the floor. "You saw what was in the room?"

"Not really. I mean I saw the man who killed Zeffer."

"And the ghosts. You saw the ghosts."

"Yes, I saw them. And worse."

"And you believe all that's real?"

"What's the alternative?"

"I've told you. It's all just some hallucination I'm having."

"I think I'd know if I was having an hallucination."

"Have you ever done LSD? Really good LSD Or magic mushrooms?"

"No."

"See, you do some of that stuff and it's like you never look at the real world the same way again. You can never really trust it. I mean it's all consensual

reality anyhow, right?"

"I don't know what the hell that is."

"It's a phrase my dealer uses. Jerome Bunny is his name. He's a real philosopher. It isn't just drugs with him, it's a way of looking at the world. And

he used to say we all just agree on what's real, for convenience sake."

"I still don't get it," Tammy said wearily.

"Well he used to explain it better."

Page 153

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"Anyway, I thought you didn't do drugs. You said in People you were horrified to see what drugs had done to friends of yours."

"Did I name anyone?"

"Robert Downey Jr. was one. 'A great actor,' you said, 'killing himself for

the highs,' you said."

"Well I don't fry my brains every night like Robert did. I know my limits. A

little pot. A few tabs of acid-" He stopped, looking a little irritated. "Anyway, I

don't have to justify myself to you."

"I didn't say you did."

"Quoting me-"

"Well that's what you said."

"Well it's bullshit. It's his life. He can do what the hell he likes with it. Where did all this start anyhow?"

"You saying-"

"Oh yeah, we're having this dream together, because that way doesn't exist.

Can't exist. It's all something invented. I mean, how can any of that be real?"

"I don't know," said Tammy flatly. "But whatever you say about dreams or

consenting reality or whatever it was: that place is real, Todd. It's up there in

the hills right now. And she's there too. And she's planning her next move."

"You sound very sure." He was studying his reflection in the mirror of the

dresser as he talked to her.

"I am sure. She's not going to let go of you. She'll find a way to get you back."

"Look at me," he said. "I think you look fine."

"I'm a mess. Burrows fucked it all up." His hands went up to his face.
"It's

gotta be a dream..." he said, returning to his old theme. "I can't look like this in

the real world."

"I do," Tammy said, considering her own unhappy reflection. "I look like

this." She pinched herself. "I'm real," she said. "Yeah?" he said softly.

"I know who I am. I know how I got here, where I came from, where my husband

works."

"Your husband?"

"Yes, my husband. Why? Are you surprised a woman with my dress size has got

a husband? Well, I have. His name's Arnie, and he works at Sacramento Airport. And

you don't know anything about him, do you?"

"No."

"So you can't have dreamed him, can you?"

"No."

"See? That's my life. My problem."

"Why's it a problem?"

"Because he drinks too much and he doesn't love me and he's having an affair

with this woman who works at the FedEx office."

"No shit. Is he the violent type?"

"He would be if I let him."

"But you don't."

"I fractured one of his ribs the last time he tried something stupid like that. He was drunk. But that's no excuse."

"So why do you stay with him?"

"You really want to know?"

"Yeah."

"Sound like you mean it."

"I mean it."

"If I tell you, you've got to promise me one thing."

"What's that?"

"Promise first."

"Shit. I promise. Scout's honor. Why'd you stay with him?"

"Because being alone is the worst. Especially for a woman. I walked out on

him two and a half years ago, when I found out about one of his women, but after a

month I had to go back to him. Being on my own made me crazy. I made him tell me he

was sorry for humiliating me and that he'd never do it again, but I knew that wasn't

true. Men can't help being pigs. It's the way God made them."

"And I suppose women are-"

"Bitches, most of us. Me included. But sometimes you need to be a bitch so

you can get through the day."

Page 154

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"And Katya?"

"I wondered how long it would take you to get round to her," Tammy said.

"Well I'll tell you how much of a bitch she was. You know the man she threw into the

room?" Todd nodded. "His name was Zeffer. He was the man who made her into a

movie-star. That's the kind of woman she was.

"There was another side to her, believe me."

"Don't tell me: she loves dogs."

"Wait..." he said wearily, waving away her cynicism. "I'm trying to explain

something here."

"I don't want to hear about her kinder, gentler side."

"Why not?"

"Because she's a bad woman, Todd. They named Coldheart Canyon

after her, for

God's sake. Did you know that? Anyway, we're neither of us going back up there.

Agreed?"

Todd didn't reply. He simply stared at the faded photograph of the Hollywood

sign that hung above the bed. "Didn't somebody throw themselves off that?" he said

finally.

"Yeah. Her name was Peg Entwistle. She was a failed actress. Did you hear

what I said?" Tammy said.

"About what?"

"Neither of us is going back up to see Katya again, agreed? You're not going

to try and sneak back up there the moment my back's turned?"

"Why? Would it matter so much if I did?" he said. His belief that all this

was a dream seemed to have lost credibility in the last few minutes, "You're never

going to see me again after this anyway."

It was true of course: this was the first and last time she'd sit in a motel

room and have a conversation with Todd Pickett. But it still stung her to hear it

said. Hurt, she stumbled after a response. "It only matters because I want the best

for you."

"Then move over," he said, coming to the bed, "and let me lie down and

sleep. Because that's what I want right now." She got up off the bed. "You not going

to sleep?" he said. "There isn't room for both of us."

"Sure there is. Lie down and get some rest. We'll talk about this when we've

got some sleep."

He slipped off his shoes and lay down, placing one of the paper-thin pillows

beside the other so they'd both have somewhere to lay their heads. "Go on," he said.

"Lie down. I won't bite."

"You do know how weird all this is for me, don't you?"

"Which part: the girl, the house, the Devil's wife-"

"No. You and me, together in one bed."

"Don't worry, I'm not going to be making sexual advances-"

"I know that-"

"I'm just suggesting we get some sleep."

"Yeah. Well. Okay. But it's still weird. You know, you used to be somebody I

idolized."

"With a heavy emphasis on the used to be," Todd said, opening one eye and

looking at her.

"Don't be so sensitive."

"No. I get the message. It was the same when I met Paul Newman, in the

flesh," He closed his eye again. "I always used to think he was the coolest of all

the cool guys. He had those ice-blue eyes, and that easy way of..." his words were

getting slower, dreamier "...walking into a room...and I used to think...when I'm

famous..." The words trailed away.

"Todd?"

He opened his eyes a fraction and looked at her between the lashes.

"What

was I saying?"

"Never mind," she said to him, sitting on the bed. "Go to sleep."

"No, tell me. What was I saying?"

"How much you wanted to be like Paul Newman."

"Oh yeah. I just used to practice my Newman act for hours on end. The way

everything he did was so relaxed. Sometimes he looked so relaxed you couldn't

believe he was acting at all. It looked so...easy..."

While he talked Tammy took off her own shoes (her feet were filthy, and

ached, but she didn't have the strength to get into a shower), and then

lay down

Page 155

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

beside Todd. He didn't even seem to realize she was there beside him. His monologue

continued, though it became less coherent, as sleep steadily made his tongue more

sluggish.

"When I met him...finally met him...he was...so...small..."

His conclusion reached, he began to snore gently.

Tammy sat up on her elbows and looked at him, lying there, wondering how she

would have felt if she'd been told a few days ago that she'd be sharing a bed with

Todd Pickett. It would have made her heart jump a beat to even contemplate the

possibility. And yet here she was, lying down beside him, and she felt nothing;

nothing except a vague irritation that she was not going to get a fair share of the

bed with him sprawled out over it. Oh well, she had no choice. She could either

sleep on the bed with Mr. Heart-throb, or take the floor.

She closed her eyes.

She was exhausted: sleep came in a matter of moments. There were no dreams.

THREE

While the two mismatched adventurers slept in the subterranean murk of Room

131 in the Wilshire Plaza Hotel, a sleep too deep to be called comfortable; too

close to death, in fact-the city of Los Angeles got up and went about its daily

business. There was profit to be made. There were movies being shot all over the

city. Joyless little pornos being made in ratty motels, witless spectacles with

budgets that could have supported small nations made on the soundstages of Culver

City and Burbank; penniless independent films about the lives of hustlers, whores

and penniless film-makers shot wherever a room could be found and the actors

assembled. Some would go onto glory; even the pornos had their nights of

prize-giving now, when the lucky lady voted Best Cock-Sucker was called to the

podium to humbly thank her agent, her mother and Jesus Christ.

But the fictions, whether sex or science-fiction, were not the only dramas

that would be played out today. This was a city that made its profit by selling

dreams, not least of itself, and so every day young hopefuls arrived by bus and by

plane to try their luck. And every day a few of those dreamers, having been here a

few months (sometimes a few years) realized that their place in the food chain of

fame was lower than a piece of week-old sushi. It was not going to happen for them:

they weren't going to be the next Meryl Streep, the next Todd Pickett, the next Jim

Carrey. They'd have to wait another lifetime for their slice of fame; or the

lifetime after that, or the lifetime after that. And for some, it wasn't news they

could bear to take home with them. Better to buy a gun (as Ryan Tyler, real name

Norman Miles, did that morning) and go back to your one room apartment and blow out

your brains. He'd had two lines in one of the Lethal Weapon movies, which he'd told

everyone in Stockholm, Ohio, was the beginning of a great career. But the lines had

been cut, and for some reason he'd never caught a director's eye ever again. Not

once in six years, since he'd had those two lines, had he been called back for an

audition. The bullet was kinder than the silent phone. His death didn't make the

news.

The suicide of one Rod McCloud did, but only because he'd thrown himself off

a bridge onto the 405 and brought the morning traffic in both directions to a halt

for an hour. McCloud had actually won an Oscar; he'd been the co-recipient (with

four other producers) of the coveted little icon fourteen years earlier. There

hadn't been time for him to reach the microphone and thank his agent and Jesus

Christ; the orchestra had started playing the exit music before the man in front of

him had finished giving his thanks; then it was too late.

At noon, another suicide was discovered; that of a man who, unlike

McCloud—who had been sixty-one—was still at the beginning of his life. Two years ago

Justin Thaw had been named by Vanity Fair the Most Powerful Agent In LA Under

Twenty-Five (he was twenty-two at the time), and had been groomed by the greatest of

the city's agent-deities as the inheritor of his chair, made a noose and hanged

himself in his brother's garage, leaving a suicide letter that was arranged as a

series of bullet-points (in the style his ex-boss had taught him), for maximum

clarity. He could no longer fight his addiction, he said; he was too tired of

feeling as though he was a failure, just because he was hooked on heroin. He was

sorry for all the heartless things he'd said and done to those he loved;
it had been

the drug doing, the drug saying: but it was he who was sorry, and he
who was glad to

be leaving today, because life wasn't worth the effort anymore. He was
wearing the

Page 156

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

ten thousand dollar suit he'd had made for himself in Milan, the shoes
he'd

purchased in Rome, and (so as not to make as much of a mess of his
death as he had

of his life) a pair of adult diapers.

The news of Justin's death would spread quickly, and a few executives'
doors

would be closed for a while, giving the man behind them a moment to
remember the

occasions they'd got high with Justin, and wonder whether it wasn't
time they asked

for help from Narcotics Anonymous. Then the phones from their
powerful

contemporaries started to ring again, and the pressure of the day
meant that

meditation had to be put off for a while; they took a snort or two of
coke put

Justin out of their minds, and got on with the deal-making. They
could think about

him again at the funeral.

Speaking of which: the ashes of one Jennifer Scarscella were on a
Chicago-bound plane that afternoon, headed for interment in the city
of her birth.

Jennifer had died nine months ago, but her body had only recently
been found and
identified in the LA Morgue. She had left home seven years before,
without telling
her parents where she was headed, though it wouldn't have been hard
for the
Scarscellas to figure out that their daughter had left to try her luck in
Tinseltown: all she'd ever wanted to do was be a movie star. She had
been murdered
by her boyfriend, because she'd refused, he said, to take a role in an X-
rated
movie. He was now in jail, and Jennifer was going home, having kept
her ambitions
high, and died for doing so.

And so the day went on, the shadows of the city lengthening as the
sun began
to drop from its high-point at noon.

At a little after four, there was a crisis at Warner's, when a set under
construction caught fire, gutting an entire sound stage, and badly
damaging two
adjacent sound stages. Nobody was killed, but there were still grim
faces in the
boardroom that afternoon. Insurance would cover the reconstruction
of the stages,

but the set had been built for the Warner's Christmas offering *Dark Justice*. With an

elaborate post-production schedule for the picture that required the main shoot to

be over in a month's time, things looked bad. There had been a great deal of

'creative debate' about the script, which had no less than fourteen writers

presently attached to it. Arbitration by the Writer's Guild would thin those

numbers, but nothing would make the calculation look any better if the picture

missed its Christmas release date, which it now looked likely to do. Two executives

received calls from their superiors in New York, pointing out that if they hadn't

warred so much about the script the picture would have been shot by now and the

agonizingly slow post-production underway. Instead they had a smoking shell of a

building where the big scenes were to have been shot, starting in two days. There

was a fiscal disaster in the offing, and certain people should be ready to hand in

their resignations before they were embarrassed into leaving by the imminent and

unflattering analysis as to why ninety pages of dialogue about a man who dressed up

as a jaguar to fight the villains of some fictional metropolis could not

have been

agreed on earlier, when there was four and a half million dollars' worth of writing

talent on the job. The observation that 'we're not making fucking Citizen Kane here'

dropped from several mouths that day; more often than not from men who had never

seen Kane, nor would have cared for it even if they had.

By five, with the freeways bumper to bumper as people got out of town for

the weekend, there were a plethora of accidents, but nothing of consequence. Scripts

were delivered for the weekend read; writers crossed their fingers and hoped that

somebody would read what they'd slaved over without kids fighting at their feet or

their dick in somebody's mouth or a smudge of coke on their nose; plans were made

for weekend adulteries; those letters of resignation were penned by smiling

assistants.

And through it all Todd and the woman who had once idolized him slept side

by side in the stale darkening air of Room 131.

FOUR

Tammy woke first, rising up out of a dream of the very room in which she was

sleeping, except that all the furniture had for some unfathomable reason been piled

against one end of the room, including the frame of the bed in which she was

sleeping, leaving her on a mattress on the floor. When she woke, of course, nothing

had changed. It was still an ordinary room with one extraordinary element, surreal

Page 157

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

in its lack of likelihood: the sleeping figure of Todd Pickett. There he was,

sprawled across three-quarters of the bed, his head deep in the pillow, his face-his

poor, wounded, face-free, it seemed, of troubled dreams.

What she would have given, once upon a time, for a moment like this: a

chance to lean over and kiss him awake. But she'd lost faith in such fairy-stories.

She'd seen too much of their dark side, and she never wanted to go there again, even

for the kissing of princes. Better to let them wake of their own accord, dragon-breath and all.

She glanced at the cheap digital clock on the bedside table. It was

five-twenty-one in the afternoon. Surely that couldn't be right? That they slept for

almost eleven hours? And Todd still sleeping?

Well, the latter she could believe. She knew from her years with Arnie how

some men loved to sleep. In Arnie's case he'd loved it more than anything else. More

than eating, more than drinking, certainly more than sex.

She left Todd to it, went into the tiny bathroom and switched on the light.

God, she looked terrible! How had he ever consented to get into the same bed as her?

She started her clean-up by vigorously scrubbing her teeth, then ran the shower very

hot, the way she liked it even when she felt clean, and got in. Oh, it felt good!

The soap smelled flowery, and the cheap shampoo didn't work up a satisfying lather,

but she was happy nevertheless, getting herself clean for the first time in days:

washing off the freaks, the ghosts, the dirt, the darkness. By the time she drew

back the plastic curtain the steam was so dense she could barely see across the

bathroom to the door. But it was being opened, that much she could see, and there

was Todd, standing looking at her. She grabbed the towel off the sink where she'd

left it, and used it as best she could to cover her considerable nakedness.

"Good morning," he said.

"Good afternoon," she replied.

"It isn't."

"Almost five-thirty," she said. "There's a clock beside the bed. Why don't

you go look? And close the door after you."

"I gotta take a leak first. I'm sorry. But I gotta."

"Let me get out first."

"Just don't look," he said, unzipping himself.

She drew the shower curtain back, and continued to dry herself, while for

the second time in the last twelve hours she heard the solid splash of him emptying

his bladder. He took an age. By the time he was finished she was almost done drying

herself.

"Okay, I'm done," he said, with evident relief. "Does this place have room

service?"

"Yes."

"You want something to eat?"

This was no time to be ladylike, she told herself. "I'm starving," she said.

"What do you want?"

"Just food. Nothing fancy."

"I shouldn't think there's much danger of that."

She waited until she'd heard the door click closed, then she pulled the shower curtain back and finished off drying her nooks and crannies. She could hear

his voice as he ordered food on the phone. It sounded like the soundtrack of a Todd

Pickett movie playing on the television next door. Stepping out of the bath she

cleared a hole in the steamed-up mirror with the ball of her hand and regarded her

reflection balefully. She was cleaner, but that was about the only improvement. She

opened the door a crack.

"I need some dean clothes."

Todd was sitting on the bed. He'd finished making his order and had turned

on one of the late afternoon chat shows.

"You can come in here and get dressed," he said, not turning from the screen. "I won't look."

She discarded her sodden towel and ventured in, sorting through the meager

contents of her suitcase for something presentable.

"I ordered club sandwiches," Todd said. "That was pretty much all they had.

And coffee."

"Fine."

As she pulled on her underwear she glanced up at the television. A

woman in

a red polyester blouse three sizes too small for her was complaining vociferously to

Page 158

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

the host of the show that her daughter, who looked about eleven, went out every

night 'dressed like a cheap little slut.'

"I love this shit," Todd said.

"People's lives," Tammy replied.

"I guess they're happy. They get their fifteen minutes,"

"Did you like yours?"

"I got more than fifteen," he said.

"I didn't mean to offend you. I was just asking."

"Sure, I enjoyed it. Who wouldn't? The first few times you're in a restaurant and a waiter recognizes you, or somebody sends over a drink, you get a

buzz out of that. In fact, you feel like you're the only person who matters..." His

voice trailed away. The daughter on the screen, who had the seeds of whoredom in her

pre-pubescent features, was telling the audience that if she wanted to dress like a

slut that was her business, and anyway who did she learn it from? She stabbed her

finger in the direction of her mother, who did her best to look virtuous, but given

what she'd chosen to do with her hair, makeup and outfit didn't have a chance. Todd

laughed, then went back to what he was telling Tammy.

"The whole 'look at me, I'm a star' thing gets old pretty quickly. And after

a while you start to wish people didn't know who you were."

"Really?"

"Actually, it's more that you want to be able to turn it on or off. Oh shit,

look at this-"

The slutty daughter was now up off her chair, and attempting to attack her

mother. Luckily, there was a security man ready to step in and stop her. Unluckily,

he wasn't quite fast enough to do so. The girl threw herself upon her mother with

such violence the woman's chair topped over, and the security man, who had by now

taken hold of the girl to keep her from doing harm, fell forward too, so that chair,

mother, daughter and security man ended up on the studio floor together. Todd

continued to talk through it.

"There are days when you really want to feel good about yourself; you want

to be recognized, you want people to say: I loved your movie so much I saw it six

times. And then there are other days when it's a curse to have people know who the

hell you are, because there's no privacy, no way to just go out and be yourself.

Everything becomes a performance." He pointed at the brawlers on television. "Look

at these stupid bitches. What are they going to say when their friends see this?" He

pondered his own question for a moment, then he said: "Actually, I know exactly what

they're going to say. They're going to say: did you see me on the TV? That's all

that matters. Not: did you see me being smart or looking beautiful:

just did you see

me?"

He watched the women's antics for a while longer, shaking his head. Then he

glanced over at Tammy and said:

"I've been thinking maybe I'm done with the movies. Or movies are done with

me. It's time to buy a ranch in Montana and raise horses."

"Really?" Tammy had finally got dressed, and came to sit down on the unmade

bed beside Todd. "You're going to retire?"

He laughed.

"What's so funny?"

"Oh, just hearing the word. Retire. At thirty-four."

"I thought you were thirty-two. Your bio-"

"I lied."

"Oh."

"But I'm still young. Right? I mean, thirty-four is still young."

"A mere kitten."

"I just can't face the idea of that circus for one more day..." He turned off the television. The room was suddenly very silent.

After a few moments Tammy said: "Are we going to talk about it or not?"

Todd stared at the blank television. She couldn't see his expression but

she

was certain it was just as vacant as the screen.

"The Canyon, Todd," she said again. "Are we going to talk about what happened in the Canyon or not?"

"Yes," he replied finally. "I suppose so."

"Last night you said it wasn't real."

"I was tired."

"So?"

Page 159

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"It's real. I knew last night I was talking bullshit..."

He kept his back to her through this, as though he didn't want to let her

see his incomprehension; as though it were something to be ashamed of.

"You saw more than I did," she said to Todd. "So you've probably got a clearer idea of what's going on. And you talked to-"

"Katya."

"Yes. And. What did she tell you?"

"She told me the room downstairs had been given to her."

"By Zeffer. Yes, I know that part."

"Then what are you asking me for?" he said. "You probably know as much as I

do."

"What about Maxine?"

"What about her?"

"She must have checked out the house for you-"

"Yeah. She took photographs-"

"Maybe she has some answers."

"Maxine?" He got up off the bed and went to the table to pick up his

cigarettes. He took one out of the packet and lit it, inhaling deeply.

"As soon as

she'd moved me into that fucking house she told me she didn't want to manage me any

longer," he said.

There was a knock at the door. "Room service."

Tammy opened the door and an elderly man, who frankly looked as though this

might be the last club sandwiches and coffee he delivered, tottered in, and set the

laden tray on the table.

"I asked for extra mayonnaise," Todd said.

"Here, sir." The old man proffered a small milk jug, into which several spoonfuls of mayonnaise had been deposited.

"Thank you, it's all fine," Tammy said.

Todd went into his jeans pocket and pulled out a bundle of notes. He selected a twenty-much to the antiquated waiter's delight-and gave it

to the man.

"Thank you very much sir," he said, exiting rather faster than he'd entered,

in case the man in the filthy jeans changed his mind.

They set to eating.

"You know what?" Todd said.

"What?"

"I think I should go and see Maxine. Ask her what she knows, face to face.

Maybe this was all some kind of set up-"

"If you get her on the phone-?"

"She'll lie."

"You've had that experience?"

"Several times."

"Where does she live?"

"Well she's got three houses. A house in Aspen, a place in the Hamptons and

a house in Malibu."

"Oh how she must suffer," Tammy said, teasing a piece of crispy bacon out of

her sandwich and nibbling on it. "Only three houses? How does she manage?"

"So eat up. We'll just drop in on her."

"Both of us?"

"Both of us. That way she can't tell me I'm crazy. What I saw, you saw."

"Actually, I saw some shit you didn't see."

"Well, we'll be sure to get some answers from her."

"Are you certain you want me to come?"

"There's safety in numbers," Todd said. "Drink your coffee and let's get going."

FIVE

Katya hadn't wasted any time weeping over Todd's departure. What was the

use? She'd shed more than her share of tears over men and their betrayals across the

years. What good had any of her weeping ever done her?

Besides, it wasn't as if she'd truly lost the man; he'd simply drifted away

from her for a few hours, that was all. She'd get him back, humbled and begging to

be returned into her company. After all, hadn't she let him kiss her? Hadn't she let

him fuck her, there in the Devil's Country? He could never forget those memories.

Page 160

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

Oh, he could try. He could put a hundred women, a thousand, between the two

of them, but it wouldn't work. Sooner or later he'd come crawling

back to her for

more of what only she could give him, and nothing that fat bitch of a woman who'd

coaxed him away could say would keep him from coming back. A man like Todd had

nothing in common with a creature like that. He understood the world in ways she

could not even guess at. What hope did she have of seeing with his eyes, even for a

moment? None. She was a workhorse. Todd had lived with beauty too long to put up

with the presence of something so charmless for very long. After a few hours of her

clumsy company, he'd be off.

She had only one fear: that owing to the artful way her Canyon had been

hidden, he wouldn't be able to find his way back to her.

The city had never been a simple place even during the years she'd lived in

it; it was easy to get lost or distracted. How much more complicated would it be

now, especially for someone like her poor Todd, whose soul was so muddled and

confused. She knew how that felt, to have everyone falling over themselves to adore

you one moment, and the next to find that those same people had given their

devotions over to somebody else. It turned everything upside down

when that

happened; nothing made sense anymore. You started looking around for something to

hold on to; something firm and solid, that wouldn't be taken away. In such a mood of

desperation, it was possible you could make a mistake: choose the wrong person to

believe in, the wrong path to follow. Even now, he could be moving away from her.

The more she contemplated that prospect the more it became apparent that she

was going to have to go and find him.

The idea of venturing out of her Canyon filled her with a mingling of fear

and anticipation.

The world! The great, wide world!

It was three quarters of a century since she'd stepped beyond the bounds of

the Canyon; and though she'd had plenty of clues as to the way things had changed,

from those who'd come here after their decease, it would still be an intimidating

experience for her to venture out there, even on a mission of love.

But what other choice did she have? Without him, her hopes were in ruins.

She had to go and find him, it was as simple as that. And on the way back, once they

were together again maybe she'd have the strength of heart to visit
some of the

places she'd known and loved in her youth; just to see how time had
altered them.

But then again perhaps that wouldn't be such a good idea. It troubled
her enough to

look out of the window and see the stretches of land that had been
dust roads and

shacks and orange groves in her time now completely transformed
into towers of steel

and glass. What if she were to discover that some precious place she'd
loved had

been desecrated; rendered unrecognizable? Though she liked to think
she was

fearless, in truth time was taking its toll on the resilience of her soul.

But then, of course, this whole quest was a test of her strength, wasn't
it?

Venturing beyond the perimeters of her Canyon, beyond the reach of
the magic

that had preserved her perfection, was gambling with her life. She had
no way of

knowing for certain but she guessed that the further she ventured, and
the longer

she remained away from the Canyon, from the house and all it
contained, the more

vulnerable she'd be to the long-postponed indignities of old age. After
all, a

beneath this veneer of youth she was a Methuselah. How long could
she afford to be

out in the raptureless world before the shell cracked and the crone
inside, the hag

that the Devil's Country had obscured with its magic, was unveiled?

It was terrifying. But in the end, it came down to this: finding Todd
was

worth the risk. If she survived the journey they would come back to
the Canyon and

initiate a new Golden Age. It wouldn't be like the previous Age of
Gold, with its

foolish excesses. This would be a more profoundly felt time, when
instead of using

the Devil's Country like a cross between a two-bit ghost-train ride and
a fountain

of youth, it would be respected as the mystery it was.

Despite the perverse pride she'd taken in showing Todd the orgiasts in
the

Canyon, and in letting him share their excesses, Katya's appetite for
the witless

hedonism of the twenties had long since passed away. And though
Todd had happily

played the sensualist, she was sure that he too had seen enough of the
tawdriness of

such spectacles. It was time they behaved as owners of something
genuinely

marvelous; and treated it respectfully. Together, they would begin an
exploration of

the world Lilith had made. Katya had never possessed the courage to
explore as it

deserved to be explored, road by road, grove by sacred grove.
Certainly she'd seen

plenty there over the years that had inflamed her sexual self (women
tethered to the

Page 161

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

underbellies of human-horses, in a constant state of ecstatic agony);
and she would

not scorn such spectacles if they came on them again. But these were
other sights,

designed to arouse the spirit not the loins; and it was to those places
she wanted

to take Todd.

There were enough diversions and wonders to keep them enchanted
for decades

to come. Though the heavens were fixed in the same configuration
whenever she

visited the Country, there was nevertheless evidence that the earth
was still

obeying some of its ancient rhythms.

There was, for instance, in the swamp, a manmade lake perhaps half a
mile

wide, which seemed to have been for many generations the place
where a certain

species of eel, the infants silver-blue, with great golden eyes, came in
their

millions-each no longer than her little finger-but sufficient in number
that they

filled the place of their birth to brimming when they spawned. For a day-when the

larval eels appeared-this Genesis Bowl, as Katya had named it, was a feasting place

for birds of every kind, who were literally able to walk on the squirming backs of

their feast, taking all they could before lifting off (some so fat with food they

could barely fly) and retiring to the nearest branch to digest their mighty meal.

The next day (if the Country could be said to have days) the Genesis Bowl was empty,

but for a few thousand runts that had perished in the exodus, and were being picked

up by carrion cows and wild dogs.

She wanted to show this glorious spectacle to Todd; wanted to wade into the

living mass of baby eels and feel them against her naked flesh.

On another day they might to a place she knew where there was a beast that

spoke prophetic riddles; which had twice engaged her in conversation which she knew

would make sense if she had the education to decode its strange poetry. It had the

body of a huge bird, this tiddler, with a man's head, and it sat, close to the

ground, with a vast array of glittering gifts around the base of its tree, offered

for its prophecies. She'd come to it a year ago, with some jewelry she had worn in

Nefertiti.

"Is it real, the gift you give me?" the creature, whose name was Yiacaxis,

had asked her.

"No," she had admitted. "I am an actress. These baubles are what I wore when

I was an actress."

"Then make them real for me," Yiacaxis had said, clicking his old grey tongue against his cracked beak. "Play me the scene in which you wore them."

"It was silent," she said.

"That's good," he replied. "For I am very deaf in my old age."

She shed most of her clothes, and put on the jewelry. Then she played the

scene from Nefertiti in which she discovers that her lover is dead by the order of

the envious Queen, and she kills herself out of tragic longing for him.

The old bird-man wept freely at her performance.

"I'm pleased it moved you so much," Katya had said when she was done.

"I accept your offering," the creature had replied, "and I will give you your answer."

"But you don't even know my question yet."

Yiacaxis clicked and cocked his head. "I know you wonder if there will ever

be a love worth dying for in your life? Is that your question?"

"Yes," she said. She would perhaps not have asked it that way, but the prophet was notoriously short-tempered with those who attempted to press him.

"There are two multitudes," he said. "One within you. One without. Should he

love you enough to name one of these legions, then you will live in bliss with the

other."

Of course she desperately wanted to ask him what this meant; but the audience was apparently already over, for Yiacaxis was raising his black wings,

which were lined with little knots of human hair, tied up in ribbons that had

long-ago lost their colour. Thousands of locks of hair, in wings that spread perhaps

twenty feet from tip to tip. Without further word, he closed them over his

melancholy face, and the shadows of the tree seemed to close around him a second

time, so that he was invisible.

Perhaps, if she had the courage, she would go back to Yiacaxis, with Todd,

and ask him another question. Or this time Todd should do the asking.

And when they had questioned the Prophet Bird, and seen half a

hundred other

wonders in the Devil's Country, Katya would take Todd to a certain ship with which

she was familiar, which had surely been made for a king, it was so finely wrought.

Page 162

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

It had foundered on some rocks along the shore, and there it had been left,

high and dry, many years ago. For some reason no looter had ever attempted to

despoil this sublime vessel, perhaps because they feared some royal revenge. The

only damage done to the vessel was the breaking of its hull by the rocks; and the

inevitable deterioration of its exterior paintwork by wind and rain. Inside, it

remained a place of incomparable luxury, its beautiful carved bed heaped with white

furs, the wine still sweet in its flagons, the tinder in its fireplace still

awaiting a flame. She had often fantasized about taking a lover to the ship, making

love to him on the furs. If they were lucky, the wind would get up when they were

cradled in the comfort of one another's arms. The wind would whistle in the ropes

and the scarlet sails would billow, and they would imagine, as they made love, that

they were on a voyage to the edge of the world.

It would be naive to speak lovingly of the Devil's Country without allowing

that it had its share of horrors.

There were species in the forests, and the ravines and the black silent pools between the rocks, that had been invented by some benighted mind. There were

terrible arenas, where monsters were goaded to perform acts of horrible violation

upon women, and sometimes upon men and even children. But having viewed several of

these spectacles herself, she could not deny that they were perversely arousing.

Some had the rigor of ceremonies, others seemed to be simple arenas of cruelty,

where anything might be viewed if it was paid for.

The point was that she'd seen so little, and that there was so much for her

to see; a private wonderland where she and Todd could go adventuring whenever they

tired of the Canyon. They could explore it to its very limits; and when they were

weary and needed to sleep, they could simply step through the door and lock it, and

retire to bed like any loving pair, and sleep peacefully in one another's arms.

But first she had to find him; and to find him she needed a chauffeur. Only

one man fitted that bill: Jerry Brahms. They had known one another for so many

years. That was why she'd sent out the dream-summons to him. He was loyal; he would

come without fail. It was only a matter of time before he turned up at the house,

ready to do her bidding. He was probably on his way up, even now.

It didn't take her long to dress. She had wardrobes full of gowns designed

by some of the greatest names in Hollywood history, but they were all too showy for

this modest adventure. So she chose conservatively: an immaculately-tailored black

dress. She kept her hair simple and her makeup discreet.

She was all dressed and ready to go, but there was still no sign of Jerry.

Thinking that perhaps he'd mistakenly assume she would wait for him in the big

house, she decided to wander down through the twilight to look for him. If he hadn't

arrived then she'd wait for him at the front gate, so that there'd be no chance of

their missing one another.

It was a walk she'd taken countless times, of course; though the pathway

rose and dipped, she could have done it in safety blind-folded.

The night wasn't as clear as it had been when she and Todd had come out

walking; there were rainclouds banked in from the north, and the air was sultry. It

was going to be one of those nights when you longed for a heaven-and-earth-shaking

thunderstorm, the kind she remembered from her childhood. But such events were rare

in Los Angeles. All the great storms she'd seen here had been cooked up by lighting

men and rain-machines; pure artifice.

She knew she was being watched as she walked. There wasn't a movement she

made in the open air that the ghosts or their half-breed children did not observe.

They had even made spy-holes in the walls of her little house, she knew. They

watched her at her toilette; they watched her as she read and day-dreamed; they

watched her as she slept.

She'd several times attempted to stop them and punish their voyeurism; but

every time Zeffer plugged up the holes more appeared, and finally she'd given up the

game as fruitless. If they wanted to watch her while she slept, then let them go

ahead. Indeed until Todd had come into her life the idea of having somebody to watch

over her-even if their motives were as hard to calculate as those of her voyeurs-was

close to comforting.

Needless to say there was also a measure of danger in the proximity of these

revenants. Katya didn't doubt that there was amongst their number some who would

gladly have seen her dead, blaming her for the fact that their afterlife in was a

pitiful thing. Of course she didn't blame herself. If her guests hadn't been so

Page 163

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

hungry to taste the pleasures of the Devil's Country then they wouldn't be so

obsessively drawn to it. But as long as they kept a respectful distance (why would

they not, when she controlled the very thing they wanted for themselves?) then she

would not persecute them.

They had their journey, she had hers.

She had reached the unkempt lawn, and paused there to take in the spectacle

of the house. The wind-chimes rang on four or five balconies, lending their beauty

to the grand facade. As she listened to their music she heard sounds from the

thicket on the other side of the lawn.

She glanced back. There was still sufficient light in the evening sky to

see

the motion in the blossom-laden branches. There were several creatures following

her, she guessed.

She watched the bushes for half a minute, until the motion died down. It

wasn't unusual for creatures to follow her when she went out walking, but there was

something different about this. Or was it that she was different? That tonight she

was alive as she'd not been alive in many years, her heart quickened by love; and

that they sensed a new vulnerability in her?

She didn't like that. The last thing she wanted was for them to imagine they

could intimidate her, or somehow wrest a little power from her. Love might have made

her step a little lighter, but she was still the Queen of Coldheart Canyon, and if

they pushed her she would respond with her old severity.

As she watched the thicket, the last of the light went from the sky, and the

darkness revealed several bright points of light in the bushes, where the revenants

were standing, watching her. Even after all these years she could still be

discomfited by a sight like this; by the fact that the dead were around her in such

numbers.

Enough, she thought to herself, and turning on her heel hurried towards the

stairs that led back up to the house.

As she did so she heard the swish of grass against swiftly running limbs.

They were coming across the lawn in pursuit of her.

She picked up her pace, until she reached the relative safety of the stairs.

Behind her, a soft voice, sounding as though it came from a palate full of

pulp and disease, said: "Let us in."

There was a moment's silence. Then another said. "We just want to come back

into the house."

"We won't do any harm." said a third.

"Please, let us in..."

She'd been wrong about the numbers of revenants assembled here, she slowly

realized. She thought there'd been perhaps ten, but there were two or three times

that number out there in the darkness. Whatever the decayed and corrupted condition

of their palates, they all attempted to say the same thing:

"Let us in. Let us in. Let us in."

She would have ignored them, once upon a time: turned her back on

their

pleas and climbed the stairs. But she was changing. Katya the heart-breaker-the

woman who'd never given a damn for what anybody wanted but herself-was rapidly

becoming a thing of the past. If she was going to come back with Todd and live here,

they couldn't live the idyllic life she had in mind while these hungry souls waited

outside. Even with the five iron icons hammered into the threshold of each of the

doors, and in the sills of even the smallest windows, their presence preventing the

dead from ever setting foot in the house, the occupants were in a state of siege. It

was no place to have a honeymoon.

She raised her hand to silence their murmuring.

"Listen to me," she said.

The chorus began to subside.

"I'm going to be leaving the house for a few hours," Katya said, her voice a

little tentative at the beginning, but gaining strength as she proceeded. "But when

I come back I intend to make some changes. I don't want you living in misery. That

has to stop."

She started to turn away, intending to leave the statement there. But

some

of her congregation didn't want to let her go without hearing something more

specific in her reply.

"What changes are you going to make?" someone demanded.

"Is that you, Roman?" Katya said, scanning the crowd.

The speaker didn't have time to identify himself. There were more questions.

Page 164

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

Somebody wanted to know why she was leaving; somebody else demanded to know how long

they would have to wait.

"Listen to me, listen to me," she said, quieting the rising hubbub. "I

understand that you all want to come into the house. But I don't think you

understand the consequences."

"We'll take them, whatever they are," somebody said. There was a general

murmur of agreement to this.

"If that's what you want," Katya replied, "I will consider it. When I get back-"

"What if you don't come back?"

"Trust me. I will."

"Trust you? Oh please." The mocking voice emerged from a bitter, painted

face amongst the crowd. "You tricked us all. Why the hell should we trust you now?"

"Theda," Katya said. "I don't have the time to explain right now."

"Well you hold on, honey, because we want some answers. We've had years of

waiting to go back into that room-

"Then you can afford to wait a few hours more," Katya replied, and without

waiting for Theda Bara to come back with a retort she turned and headed on up the

steps to the top of the flight.

There was a moment-just a quarter of a beat, there at the top of the stairs-when she thought she'd misjudged her audience, and they'd come up the stairs

after her, their patience finally exhausted. But they'd stayed below. Even Theda.

Perhaps somebody had caught hold of her arm, to keep her from doing something

stupid.

Katya opened the back door, stepping over the threshold. Occasionally, in

the last several decades, one of the assembly outside had taken it into their heads

to test the power of the icons Zeffer had brought back from Romania, and had

personally hammered deep into the wood. The five icons were called, Zeffer had told

her, the Iron Word. It was powerful magic designed to drive off anything that did

not belong beside cot or hearth. Katya had never actually witnessed what happened

when one of the phantoms had tested the threshold. She'd only heard the screams, and

seen the looks of terror on the faces of those who'd goaded the victim. Of the

trespasser himself, nothing remained, except a rise in the humidity of the air

around the threshold, as though the revenant had been exploded into vapor. Even

these traces lingered for only a moment. As soon as the air cooled the witnesses

retreated from the door, looks of terror still fixed on their faces.

She had no idea how the Iron Word worked. She only knew that Zeffer had paid

a member of Sandru's scattered brotherhood a small fortune to possess the secret,

and then another sum to have the icons created in sufficient numbers that every door

and window be guarded. It had been worth the investment: the Iron Word did its job.

Katya felt like her mother, who'd always boasted that she kept a 'clean house'. Of

course Mother Lupescu's definition of moral cleanliness had been purely her own.

You could fuck her twelve-year-old daughter for a small coin, but you could

not say Christ when you were shooting your load between her tiny titties without

being thrown out of the house.

And in her turn that twelve-year-old had grown up with her own particular

rules of domestic cleanliness. In short: the dead did not cross the threshold.

You had to draw the line somewhere, or all hell would break loose. On that

Mama Lupescu and her daughter would have agreed.

She got herself a cup of milk from the refrigerator to calm her stomach,

which always troubled her when, as now, she was unsettled for some reason or

another. Then she went through the house, taking her time passing from one room to

another, and as she came to the front door she heard the sound of a car coming up

the street. She stepped outside, and walked along the front path until she reached

the pool of light from the car's headlights.

"Is that you, Jerry?"

A car door opened.

"Yes, it's me," he said. "Was I expected?"

"You were."

"Well, thank God for that."

She went to the little gate, and stepped out onto the narrow sidewalk
Jerry

had got out of the car. He had a barely-suppressed look of shock on
his face, seeing

her step beyond the bounds of her little dominion for the first time.

Page 165

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"Are we actually going somewhere?" he asked her.

"I certainly hope so," she said, playing it off lightly. She could not

completely conceal her unease, however. It was there in her eyes. But
there was also

something else in her glance, besides the unease: something far more
remarkable. A

kind of sweetness, even innocence. She looked like a girl out on her
first Prom

Night, tip-toeing to the edge of womanhood.

Amazing, Jerry thought. Knowing all that he knew about Katya-all
that she'd

done and caused to have done-to be able to find that look in her
memory banks, and

put it up there on her face, so that it looked as real as it did; that was
a

performance.

"Where will I be taking you tonight, ma'am?" Jerry asked her.

"I'm not exactly sure. You see we're going to be looking for somebody."

"Are we indeed? And may I take a guess at who?"

Katya smiled. "Too easy," she said.

"We'll find him for you. Don't you worry."

"You were the one who got him to come up here in the first place, Jerry. So

you're the match-maker. And thank you. From both of us, thank you. It's been quite a

remarkable time for me, Jerry. I never thought I'd ever fall in love again. And with

an actor." She laughed. "You'd think I'd have learned by now."

"I hope it's a happy mistake."

"Oh it is, Jerry. It's perfect. He's perfect."

"Is he?"

"For me. Yes. Perfect for me."

"So will you be joining him somewhere?"

"Yes."

"But you're not exactly sure where?"

"That's right."

"Well, I'm going to hazard a guess and say he's at Maxine's, because I know

she's having a big bash tonight. Do you want me to call her, and ask her if he's

there? Maybe tell her I'm bringing a special guest?"

"No, I think it's best we just do this quietly, don't you?"

"However you prefer. Tonight's your night."

"I don't want any big hoopla," Katya said. "I just want to find him."

For a moment the illusion disappeared completely, and reality showed itself:

the desperate hunger of a woman who needed to find the love of her life. Not

tomorrow, or the day after, but tonight. She had no time to waste, this woman; no

time for error or procrastination.

"Shall we go?" she said.

"Ready when you are."

She went to the car and started to fumble with the doorhandle.

"Please," Jerry said. "Allow me." He came round to the passenger side and

opened the door.

"Thank you, Jerry. How nice. Old-fashioned manners," she said. She got in

into the car in one elegant movement. Jerry closed the door and went to the driver's

side. She was trembling, he saw; just the slightest tremor.

"It's going to be all right," he reassured her when he was settled in beside

her.

"Is it?" she said, with a smile too tentative to survive more than a breath.

"

"Yes. It's going to be fine."

"He's the one, Jerry. Todd is the one. If he were to turn me down-"

"He's not going to do that, now is he?" Jerry said. "He'd be a fool to say

no to you. And whatever else Todd is, he's no fool."

"So find him for me. Will you?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Then I can start to live again."

SIX

It had taken Todd a few minutes to get used to sitting behind the wheel of

the old Lincoln sedan which Marco had chosen, many years before, as the vehicle in

which he preferred to anonymously chauffeur Todd around. Sitting in the seat

adjusted for Marco's huge frame made him realize-for the first time in the chaotic

sequence of dramas that had unraveled since Marco's sudden death-how much he would

Page 166

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

miss the man.

Marco had been a stabilizing influence in a world that was showing signs of

becoming more unstable by the hour. But more than that: he'd been Todd's friend.

He'd had a good nose for bullshit, and he'd never been afraid of speaking his mind,

especially when it came to protecting his boss.

There would come a time, Todd had promised himself, when he would sit down

and think of something to do that would honour Caputo's name. He'd been no

intellectual, so the founding of a library, or the funding of the Caputo Prize for

Scholastic Achievement, wouldn't really be pertinent: it would need some serious

thought to create a project that reflected and honored the complexity of the man.

"You're thinking about Marco Caputo." Tammy said as she watched Todd adjust

to the spatial arrangements of the driver's seat.

"The way you said that, it didn't sound as though you liked him very much."

"He was rude to me on a couple of occasions," Tammy said, making light of it

now. "It was no big deal."

"The fact is he was more of a brother to me than my own brother," he

replied. "And I'm only now realizing how much I took him for granted. Christ. First

I lose my dog, then my best buddy-"

"Dempsey?"

"Yeah. He died of cancer in February."

"I'm sorry."

Todd turned on the ignition. His thoughts were still with Marco. "You know

what I think?" he said.

"What?"

"I think that the night he got killed he wasn't just drunk. He was panicked

and drunk."

"You mean he'd seen something?"

"Yes, that's exactly what I mean. He'd seen something up at the house and

was running away." He drew a loud breath through his nose. "Okay. Enough of the

detective work. We can do some more of that when all this is over. Right now, we're

heading for Malibu."

On the way down to the ocean, Todd provided Tammy with a little portrait of

where they were going. She knew about the Colony, of course-the guarded community of

superstars who lived in houses filled with Picassos and Miro and Monets, with the

ever-unpredictable Pacific a few yards from their back door, and-just a jump across

the Pacific Coast Highway-the Malibu Hills, which had been the scene of countless

wildfires in the hot season, and mud-slides in the wet. What she didn't

know was

just how exclusive it was, even for those who were powerful enough to write their

own rules in any other circumstances.

"I was planning to buy this house next door to Maxine's place, way back,"

Todd told her, "but my lawyer-who was this wily old fart called Lester Mayfield

said: 'You're going to want to rip out that concrete deck and take off the old

shingle roof, aren't you?' And I said: 'You betcha.' And he said: 'Well, dream on

buster, 'cause they won't let you. You'll spend the next ten years fighting with the

Colony Committee to change the color of your toilet seat."

"So I didn't buy the place. They've lightened up on the rules a lot since

then. I guess somebody must have pointed out that they were preserving some pieces

of utter shit."

"Who ended up buying the house next door to Maxine?"

"Oh...he was a producer, had a deal with Paramount. Made some very

successful movies for them. Then the IRS taps him on the shoulder and asks why he

hasn't paid his taxes for six years. He ended up going to jail, and the house stood

empty."

"Nobody else bought it?"

"No. He wanted to be back making movies when he got out of the slammer.

Which is what he did. Went straight back into the business. Made six more huge

movies. And he still snorts coke from between the tits of loose women. Bob Graydon's

his name."

"Isn't he the one who had an artificial septum put in his nose because he'd

had the real thing eaten away by cocaine?"

"That's Bob. Where'd you hear that?"

"Oh, the National Enquirer probably. I buy them all in case there's

something about you. Not that I believe everything I read-" she added hurriedly.

Page 167

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"Just the juicy bits."

"Well after a time you get a feeling about what's true and what's not true."

"Care to give me an example?"

"No."

"Go on."

"That's not fair. I'm screwed whatever I say. No! Wait! Here's one! About

two years ago they said you were going into a private hospital in Montreal to have

your ding-a-ling enlarged."

"My ding-a-ling!"

"You know what I mean."

"Do you say ding-a-ling to Arnie? It is Arnie, isn't it?"

"Yes it's Arnie and no I don't say ding-a-ling."

"Tell me about him."

"There isn't much to tell."

"Why'd you marry him? Tell me that."

"Well it wasn't because of the size of his dick."

"Dick! That's what you call it: dick."

"I guess I do," Tammy said, amused, a little embarrassed to have let this

slip. "Anyway, back to the story in The Enquirer. They said you were in Montreal

getting your thingie-your dick-made bigger. Except I knew that wasn't true."

"How come?"

"It just didn't make any sense. Not after the articles I'd read about you."

"Go on," Todd said, fascinated.

"Well...you know I read everything that's ever been written about you?

Everything in English. And then if there's a really important interview in, say,

Paris Match or Stern, I get it translated."

"Jesus. Really? What for?"

"So I can keep up with your opinions. And...sometimes in the foreign magazines they write the kind of things you wouldn't read in an American magazine.

One of them did a piece about your love-life. About all the ladies you'd dated, and

the things they'd said about you-

"My acting?"

"No. Your...other performances."

"You're kidding."

"No. I thought you knew about these things. I thought you probably signed

off on them."

"If I read every article in every magazine-

"You'd never make another movie."

"Exactly. So, go back to the article. The ladies, talking about me. What does that have to do with the story in The Enquirer!"

"Oh just that here were all these women talking about you in bed-and a few

of them were not exactly happy with the way you treated them-but none of them said,

even vaguely intimated that..."

"I had a small dick."

"Right."

"So I thought, there's no way he's gone to Montreal to have his ding-a-ling

enlarged because it's just fine as it is. Now. Can we move on, or shall I throw

myself out of the window from sheer embarrassment?"

Todd laughed. "You are an education, do you know that?"

"I am?"

"You are."

"In a good way?"

"Oh yeah, it's all good. It's all fine."

"You realize, of course, that there's stuff being written about you right now, a lot of people upset and worried."

"Why?"

"Because nobody knows what happened to you. There are plenty of people, fans

of yours, like me, who think of you practically as a member of the family. Todd did

this. Todd did that. And now, suddenly, Todd's missing. And nobody knows where he's

gone. They start to fret. They start to make up all kinds of ridiculous reasons. I

know I did. It's not that they're crazy-"

"No, look. I don't think you, or any of them, are crazy. Or if you are, it's

a good crazy. I mean, what you did last night...none of my family would have done."

"You'd be surprised how many people love you."

Page 168

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"They love something but I don't think it's me, Tammy."

"Why not?"

"Well for one thing, if you could get inside here, in my head with Todd

Pickett, you wouldn't find much worth idolizing. You really wouldn't. I am

painfully, excruciatingly, ordinary. My brother, Donnie, on the other hand: he's

worth admiring. He's smart. He's honest. I was just the one with this." He turned on

his smile as he drove and gave her the benefit of its luminosity. Then, just as

easily, he turned it off. "See, you learn to do that," he went on. "It's like a

faucet. You turn the smile on, and people bathe in it for a while, then you turn it

off and you go home and wonder what all the fuckin' fuss was about. It's not like I

deserve the adulation of millions. I can't act. And I've got the reviews to prove

it." He chuckled at his self-deprecation. "That's not mine," he said, "it was Victor

Mature."

"Okay, so you're not the best actor in Hollywood. You're not the worst either."

"No. I grant you, there's worse."

"A lot worse."

"All right, a lot worse. Still doesn't make me a good actor."

He obviously wasn't going to be moved on the subject, so Tammy left it where

it was. They drove on in silence for a while. Then he swung the mirror round, and

checked out his face. "You know I'm nervous?"

"Why?"

"In case there's anybody at Maxine's place." He went back and forth between

studying his face and checking the road.

"You look fine," Tammy told him.

"I guess it's not so bad," he said, assessing his features.

"You just look a little different from the way you used to look."

"Different enough that people will notice?"

Tammy couldn't lie to him. "Sure they'll notice. But maybe they'll say you

look better. I mean, when everything's properly healed and you've had a month's

vacation."

"You will come in with me, won't you?"

"To see Maxine? My pleasure."

"Mind if I smoke?" He didn't wait for a reply. He just rolled down the window, pulled out a battered pack of cigarettes, and lit up. The rush of nicotine

made him whoop. "That's better! Okay. We're going to do this. You and me. We're

going to ask Maxine a lot of very difficult questions, and figure out whether she's

lying to us or not."

They had reached the Pacific Coast Highway, and the roar of the traffic

through the open window made any further talk impractical for a time. They drove

north for perhaps five miles, before coming off the PCH and heading west. The area

wouldn't have been Tammy's idea of idyllic. Somehow she'd imagined Malibu being more

like a little slice of Hawaii; but in fact it was just a sliver of real estate two

or three houses deep, with the incessant din of the Pacific Coast Highway on one

side and a narrow strip of beach on the other. They'd scarcely driven more than a

quarter of a mile when they came to the Colony gates. There was a guard-house, and a

single guard, who was sitting with his booted feet up beside a small television. The

set went off as soon as they drove up, a broad smile appearing on the man's face.

"Hey, Mr. Pickett. Long time, no see."

"Ron, m'man. How goes it?"

"It goes good, it goes good."

The guard was clearly delighted that his name had been remembered.

"Are you going to Ms. Frizelle's party?"

"Oh...yeah," Todd said, throwing a panicked glance at Tammy. "We're here for

that."

"That's great." He peered past Todd, at the passenger. "And this is?"

"Oh, this is Tammy. Tammy, Ron. Ron, Tammy. Tammy's my date for the night."

"Good goin'," Ron said, to no one and about nothing in particular. Just a

general California yea-saying to the world. "Let me just call Ms. Frizelle, and tell

her you're on your way down."

"Nah," Todd said, sliding a twenty dollar bill into Ron's hand. "We're going

to surprise her."

"No problem," Ron said, waving them by. "Good to see you, by the way-"

It took Tammy a moment to realize that Ron was talking to her.

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"It's always good to meet a new friend of Mr. Pickett's." There didn't seem

to be any irony in this: it was a genuine expression of feeling.

"Well, thank you," Tammy said, thrown a little off-kilter by this.

"Fuck. She's having a party," Todd said to her as they left the guardhouse

behind them.

"So."

"So there'll be lots of people. Looking at me."

"They've got to do it sooner or later."

Todd stopped the car in the middle of the street.

"I can't. I'm not ready for this."

"Yes you are. The more you put it off the more difficult it's going to be."

Todd sat there shaking his head saying: "No. No. I can't do it."

Tammy put her hand over his. "I'm just as nervous as you are," she said.

"Feel how clammy my hand is?"

"Yeah."

"But we said we'd get answers. And the longer we take to ask her the more

lies she'll have ready."

"You do know her, don't you?" he said.

"She's my nightmare."

"Really. Why?"

"Because she stood between me and you."

"Huh."

Silence.

"So what are we going to do?" Tammy said finally.

"Shit. I don't want to do this."

"So that makes two of us. But-"

"I know, I know, if we don't do it now...All right. You win. But I will beat

the living shit out of the first person who says one word about my face."

They drove on, the houses they were driving past far more modest in scale

and design than she'd expected. There was very little here of the kitsch of Beverly

Hills: no faux-French chateaux sitting side by side with faux-Tudor mansions. The

houses were mostly extremely plain, boxlike in most cases, with very occasional

architectural flourishes. They were also very close to one another. "You wouldn't

get much privacy there," Tammy commented.

"I guess everybody just pretends not to look at everybody else. Or they just

don't care. That's more like it. They just don't care."

"That's the connection between you and Katya, isn't it? You've both been

looked at so much...and the rest of us don't know what that feels like."

"It feels like somebody's siphoning out your blood, pint by pint."

"Not good."

"No. Not good."

They rounded a corner, bringing their destination into view. The party-house

was decorated with thousands of tiny white twinkle lights, as were the two palm

trees that stood like sentinels to left and right of the door.

"Christmas came early this year," Tammy remarked.

"Apparently."

There were uniformed valets working the street; taking cars from the guests

and spiriting them away to be parked somewhere out of sight.

"Are you sure you're ready for this?" Todd asked Tammy.

"No more than you are."

"Want to go one more circle around the block?"

"Yes."

"Uh-oh. Too late."

Two valets were coming at the car bearing what must have been burdensome

smiles. As the doors were opened, Todd caught tight hold of Tammy's hand. "Don't

leave my side," he said. "Promise me you won't."

"I promise," she said, and raising her head she put on her best

impersonation of someone who was rich, famous and belonged at Todd Pickett's side.

Todd relinquished the keys to the valet.

"May I assume this is your first A-list Hollywood party in the flesh?"
Todd

said to Tammy.

"You may."

"Well then this could be a lot of fun. In a grotesque, 'there's a shark in the swimming pool' sort of way."

Page 170

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

SEVEN

There came a point, as Jerry's car was carrying Katya out of for the first

time in the better part of three quarters of a century, when her fears seemed to get

the better of her. Jerry heard a voice, as dry as a husk, out of the darkness behind

him: "I'm sorry...I don't know that I can do this."

"Do you want me to turn around?" he asked her. "I will if you want me to."

There was no reply. Just the soft sound of frightened weeping. "I wish Zeffer was still here. Why was I so cruel to him?" None of this seemed

to be for

open discussion. It was more like a private confessional. "Why am I such a bitch?

Jesus. Jesus. Everything I've ever loved..." She stopped herself, and looked up at

Jerry, catching his reflection in the mirror. "Don't mind me. It's just a crazy old

woman talking to herself."

"Maybe we should go back and find Mr. Zeffer? He could come with you. I

realize there was some bad blood between you-"

"Zeffer's dead, Jerry. I lost my temper with him, and-"

"You killed him?"

"No. I left him in the Devil's Country. Wounded by one of the hunters."

"Lord."

Jerry brought the car to a halt. He stared out of the window, horrified.

"What would you like me to do?" he said after a while. "If you can't go on without

him, I mean."

"Take no notice of me," Katya said, after a short period of reflection: "I'm

just feeling sorry for myself. Of course I can go on. What other choice do I have?"

She took another moment to study the passing world. "It's just that it's been a long

time since I was out in the real world."

"This isn't the real world, it's LA."

She saw the joke in that. They laughed together over the remark, and when

their laughter had settled into smiles, he got the car going again, down the hill.

At some unidentified point between the place where her faith had almost failed her,

and Sunset Boulevard, they crossed the boundary of Coldheart Canyon.

Their destination was already decided, of course, so there wasn't much reason to talk as they went. Jerry left Katya to her musings. He knew his Hollywood

history well enough to be sure that she would be astonished by what she was seeing.

In her time Sunset Boulevard had been little more than a dirt track once it got east

of what was now Doheny. There'd been no Century City back then, of course, no four

lane highways clogged with sleek vehicles. Just shacks and orange groves and dirt.

"I've been thinking," Katya said, somewhere around Sepulveda.

"About what?"

"Me and my wickedness."

"Your what? Your wickedness?"

"Yes, my wickedness. I don't know why it came into my mind, but it did. If I

think about the women I've played in all my really important pictures,

they were all

wicked women. Poisonous. Adulterers. One who kills her own child. Really

unforgivable women."

"But don't most actors prefer to play bad characters? Isn't it more fun?"

"Oh it is. And I had a lot to inspire me."

"Inspire you?"

"As a child, I saw wickedness with my own eyes. I had it's hands on me.

Worse, it possessed me." Her voice grew cold and dark. "My mother ran a whorehouse,

did I ever tell you that? And when I was ten or so, she just decided one night it

was time to make me available to the customers."

"Jesus."

"That's what I said to myself. Every night, I said: Jesus, please help me.

Jesus, please come and take me away from this wicked woman. Take me to heaven. But

he never came. I had to run away. Three times I ran away and my brothers found me

and dragged me back. Once she let them have me, as a reward for finding me."

"Your own brothers?"

"Five of them."

"Christ."

"Anyway, I succeeded in escaping her eventually, and when you're a thirteen-year-old, and you're out in the world on your own, you see a lot thirteen-year-olds shouldn't have to see."

Page 171

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"I'm sure you did."

"So I put all that I saw into those women. That's why people believed in

them. I was playing them for real." She fumbled at the inside of the door. "Is there

some way to open this window?"

"Oh yes. It's right there. A little black button. Push it down."

She pushed and opened the window a crack. "That's better," she said.

"You can have it all the way down."

"No, this is fine. I'll take it in stages I think."

"Yes, of course."

"Going back to the pictures, I wonder if you'd do me a favor, when we get

back to the house?"

"Of course. What?"

"In my bedroom in the guest-house there are six or seven posters from those

early films of mine. I've had them up there for so long, all around the bed. I think

it's time I got rid of them. Will you burn them for me?"

"Are you sure you want them burned? They're worth a fortune."

"Then take them for yourself. Put them up for auction. And the bed.
You want

the bed too?"

"There isn't room for it in my apartment, but if you want me to get rid
of

it for you-"

"Yes, please."

"No problem."

"If you make some money from it, then spend it. Enjoy it."

"Thank you."

"No, it's me who should be thanking you. You've been a great comfort
tome."

"May I ask you why?"

"Why what?"

"Why are you getting rid of all that stuff now?"

"Because everything's changed for me. That woman I used to be has
gone. So

are all the things she stood for."

"They were just films."

"They were more than that. They were my memories. And now's the
time to let

go of them. I want to start over with Todd."

Jerry drew a deep breath to reply to this, but then thought better of it and

kept his silence. Katya was acutely aware of every nuance in her immediate locality,

however; even this.

"Say what's on your mind," she said.

"It's none of my business."

"Say it anyway. Go on."

"Well. I just hope you're not relying too much on Todd Pickett. You know

he's not all that reliable. None of them are, these younger guys. They're all talk."

"He's different."

"I hope so."

"We can't ever know why things happen between two people. But when it feels

right, you have to go with your instincts."

"If he's so right for you, why did he run out on you?"

"That was my fault, not his. I showed him some things which were more than

he was ready to see. I won't make that mistake again. And then he had some woman

with him, Tammy Somebody-or-Other, who was just trying to steal him away. Do you

know her?"

"Tammy? No. I don't know a Tammy. Oh wait. I do. I had a call from

the

police in Sacramento. She went missing."

"And they called you. Why?"

"Because I know Todd. Apparently, this Tammy woman runs his fan-club."

Katya started to laugh.

"That's all she is to him?" she said.

"Apparently."

"She runs his fan-club?"

"That's my understanding."

"So there's no romance between them?"

"No. I don't even think they really know one another."

"Well, that solves that."

"It does and it doesn't," Jerry said cautiously. "She still persuaded him to

go with her."

Page 172

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"Then it's up to me to persuade him to come home," Katya purred. She pressed

her window button, and kept it down until the window was entirely open. Jerry caught

a glimpse of her in the mirror. The last of her caution and her fear had evaporated.

She was luxuriating in the warm wind against her face; eyes closed, hair shining.

"How much farther?" she asked him, without opening her eyes.

"Another ten minutes."

"I can smell the ocean."

"Well, we're at Fourth Street. Four blocks over, there's the beach."

"I love the sea."

"Todd has a yacht, did you know that? It's docked in San Diego."

"You see. Perfect." She opened her eyes, catching Jerry's gaze in the mirror, demanding a response from him.

"Yes, it's perfect," he said.

She smiled. "Thank you," she said.

"For what?"

"For everything. Bringing me here. Listening to me, indulging me. When

things have settled down and Todd and I have made the Canyon a more civilized place,

we're going to start inviting people over, just a few special friends, to share the

beauty of the place. You never saw the house at its best. But you will. It is

magnificent."

"Oh I'm sure."

"And that's how it's going to be again, after tonight."

"Magnificent?"

"Magnificent."

EIGHT

This was Tammy's Cinderella moment: her dream come true. All right, perhaps

all the details weren't perfect. She could have looked a little more glamorous, and

she would have liked to have lost another twenty-five pounds. And they could have

been coming in through the front door instead of slipping in at the side to avoid

the photographers. But she was happy to take what fate was giving her: and fate was

giving her a chance to walk into an A-list party on the arm of Todd Pickett.

Everywhere she looked there were famous faces, famous smiles, famous gazes,

famous figures swathed in gowns by famous designers, famous fools making jokes that

had everyone in their circle breathless with laughter, famous power-brokers telling

tales of how they'd made a million in a minute, and the less famous wives of these

power-brokers listening with their lids half-closed because if they had a buck for

every time they'd heard these tired old tales they'd be able to divorce their

dead-weights of husbands.

And hanging on the arms of the famous (much as she was hanging on Todd's

arm) were younger men and women who watched their companions with the kind of eyes

Tammy was reserving for the hors d'oeuvres. There was appetite in those eyes. One

day, those gazes seem to say, I will have all that you have. I will own cars and

yachts and palaces and houses. I will have a small vineyard in Tuscany and a large

ranch in Big Sky Country. There will be no door that will be closed to me; no ear

that will not attend to my concerns. When I drop my purse, somebody will pick it up

for me. When my car is empty of gas, it will be miraculously filled (and the

ashtrays emptied). If the drink in my hand is getting low, it will be replenished

without my requesting it. When I am hungry, somebody will make food that will be so

exquisitely shaped every mouthful is like a little meal unto itself.

In fact, the food was drawing her attention about as much as the famous

faces. She'd never seen such exquisite little confections, and each one had a

description, proffered by its server, much of which was so remote from Tammy's

experience she didn't understand it. Slices of rare marinated this on slices of

smoked that, drizzled with-

Oh what the hell? She'd take two. No make that three. It was only
finger-food, for God's sake, and she was hungry.

To wash it all down she'd accepted a Bellini from a dazzling waiter as
soon

as she'd stepped inside, and it tasted so sweet and harmless she
downed two-thirds

of her glass before she realized how potent it was. In truth, however,
it would

scarcely have mattered if she'd downed five Bellinis and fallen flat on
her face.

She was invisible as far as these people were concerned. The glacial
beauties and

their handsome swains, the deal-makers and the word-splitters, none
of them wanted

Page 173

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

to concede her ragged presence in their gilded midst: so they simply
looked the

other way. Once or twice she caught the tail of a mystified glance laid
upon her,

but these were from amateurs at the game. To the true professionals-
which is to say

most of the people in this assembly-she was simply a non-presence.
She could have

been standing right in their line of vision and somehow their gaze
would have slid

off her and around her; anything to avoid seeing her.

She caught tight hold of Todd's hand. So much for the Cinderella fantasy. It

was a nightmare.

Much to her delight Todd clutched her hand in return. His palm was pouring

sweat.

"They're all looking at me," he said, leaning close to her.

"No, they're not."

"Hi, Todd."

"Hi, Jodie. Good to-see that? They say hi then they move on. She's gone

already. Hi, Steven! When are you-? Too late. He's off. It's fucking uncanny."

"Where's Maxine?"

"I haven't seen her yet. She's probably out back. She likes to sit and hold

court at these things. She says only hostesses circulate."

"And she's not the hostess?"

"Fuck, no. These aren't her guests. They're her supplicants." Tammy had seen

some attractive-looking hors d'oeuvres sailing by.

"I'll have one of those," she said, tapping the waiter on the shoulder, "if

you don't ask in this place," she explained, as she took three, "you don't get."

"Are they good?"

"What do I know? They're filling a hole. Very slowly. Doesn't anybody have

any appetite around here?"

"Not publicly."

To get to the back of the house he had led her into a larger room-which,

despite the fact that it was packed with guests-was almost as hushed as a library. A

few people looked round at Todd-a few even attempted tentative smiles-but nobody

made any move to break off their whispered exchanges and approach him, for which

Tammy was grateful. The density of famous faces was much the same in here as it had

been next door. This really was the crÈme de la crÈme: the people who could get a

studio to spend several million dollars developing a script by simply hinting that

they might be in it when it was finished; the names above the tide that audiences

knew so well they only used an actor's given name when they were talking about the

show: Bruce and Demi and Brad and Tom and all the rest. Next year, some portion of

the crowd would have slipped onto the B-list, after a dud or two. But tonight they

were at the top of their game; famous amongst the famous. Tonight

there wasn't an

agency in the city that wouldn't have signed them on the spot; or a late-night

talk-show that wouldn't have bumped Einstein, Van Gogh and the Pope to have them on.

They were American royalty, the way that Pickford and Fairbanks had been royalty in

the early years. Yes, there were more crowns now; more thrones. But there were also

more fans, in every corner of the world, men and women ready to fawn and obsess. In

short, none of these were people who hurt for want of admiration. They had a surfeit

of it, the way the rest of the world had a surfeit of credit-card debt.

It was harder, in this more densely-populated space, for people not to

concede the presence of Todd, who took hold of several unoffered hands and grabbed a

couple of shoulders as he crossed the room, determined that nobody get away with

pretending they hadn't seen him. And when a fragment of conversation did spring up,

as it occasionally did, Todd very rapidly (and rather gallantly) made certain that

Tammy was introduced into the exchange.

"You don't need to do that," Tammy said, after the third such occasion.

"Yes, I do," Todd replied. "These sonsabitches think they can look the other

way and pretend you don't exist. Well fuck 'em. I've starred in movies with some of

these assholes. Movies you paid your seven bucks to see. And they were mostly shit

pictures. So I figure they owe you a seven-buck-handshake."

She laughed out loud, thoroughly entertained by his heretical talk. Whatever

happened after this, she thought, (and no fairy-tale lasted forever) she'd at least

have this extraordinary memory to treasure: walking arm-in-arm with the only man

she'd ever really loved through a crowd of fools, knowing that even if they didn't

look at her they still knew she was there. And when she'd gone she'd be somebody

they'd never be able to figure out, which suited her just fine. Let them wonder. It

would give them something to do when they were studying their reflections in the

Page 174

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

morning.

"There's Maxine," Todd said. "Didn't I say she'd be holding court?"

It was a couple of years since Tammy had seen Maxine Frizelle in the flesh.

In that time she had projected upon the woman an aura of power which in truth she

didn't possess. She was smaller and more fretful-looking than Tammy
Remembered: the

way she was perched in a high-backed chair, her bare feet off the
ground, was

presumably designed to give off the aura of childlike vulnerability, but
in fact

suggested just its opposite. The pose looked awkward and artificial;
her gaze was

woozy rather than happy, and her smile completely false.

Todd let go of Tammy's hand.

"Are you doing this on your own from here?" she said to him.

"I think I ought to."

Tammy shrugged. "Whatever you want."

"I mean, it's going to be difficult."

"Yeah..." she said, the observation given credence by the frigid stare
they

were getting from the patio.

"She's seen you," Tammy said.

She smiled in Maxine's direction. The woman was getting up off her
chair,

her expression more bemused than angry. She leaned over and
whispered something to

the young man at her side. He nodded in response, and left the patio,
heading

indoors and weaving his way through the party-goers towards Tammy
and Todd.

Tammy grabbed hold of Todd's hand again. "You know what?" she said.

"What?"

"I was wrong. We're going to do this together."

NINE

Out on the street, Katya let the valet open the car door for her, her eyes

fixed on the house into which she was about to make an entrance. A hundred thoughts

were crowding into her head at the same time, all demanding attention. Would anybody

recognize her? Jerry had told her many times her films remained widely seen and

appreciated, so it was inevitable somebody was going to figure out who she was. On

the other hand it had been the style in those days to slather your face in makeup,

so perhaps nobody would think to associate her with the high style of those movies.

Nor, of course, would anybody assume that the Katya Lupi of The Sorrows of Frederick

or Nefertiti could possibly resemble the young woman she still seemed to be. So

again, perhaps her fears were groundless. And if somebody did recognize her, against

all the odds, then she'd swiftly find some witty riposte about the brilliance of

modern science, and let them wonder. If she sent a few admirers off

shaking their

heads, mystified by her untouched beauty, would that be such a bad thing?

She had nothing to fear from these people.

She was beautiful. And beauty was the only certain weapon against a brutal

mind or a stupid world. Why should that power have deserted her?

She looked around, subduing a little burst of panic, to find that Jerry was

not at her side.

"I'm here," he said, sauntering over from a very handsome and now

well-tipped valet. "I've been getting the scoop. Todd arrived a few minutes ago."

Her face blossomed.

"He's here?"

"He's here."

She was suddenly like a little child. "I knew this was going to work!" she

said. "I knew! I knew!" Then, just as suddenly, a doubt: "Is that woman with him?"

"Tammy Lauper? Yes she is."

"I want you to separate them."

"Just like that."

"Yes," she said, deadly serious. "Do whatever you have to do. I just want

you to part them, so that I can talk to Todd on his own. As soon as I get a chance

to do that, the three of us can be out of here."

"Suppose he wants to stay?"

"With her?"

"No. Amongst his friends."

"He can't," she said. "He won't want to, when he sees me. He'll just come.

You'll see."

Her confidence was beguiling, whether it was fake or not. She took his arm,

Page 175

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

and they headed into the house. If Jerry had been expecting some grotesque echo of

Sunset Boulevard he was pleasantly disappointed. Katya met the cameras at the door

with an expression of familiarity on her face, as though she were saying to the

world: oh, there you are. She let go of his hand at the threshold and like a ship

that suddenly finds the wind again, and remembers what it has to do effortlessly.

She turned and the cameramen got greedy for her: the flashes a blinding barrage, and

she bathing in me light as it glazed her bones and filled her eyes.

Of course none of them knew who the hell she was, so they were reduced to

snapping their fingers and calling 'Miss uh-?! 'Over here, Miss-?' But she knew her

job. She gave them all something wonderful, something miraculous, and just as the

frenzy was approaching its height, abruptly refused to continue, thanking them all

and sweeping away into the house, leaving them begging for more.

This sudden burst of activity had attracted attention, of course. Half the

faces in the room were turned towards the door when Katya entered, wondering who the

hell could have just arrived. When it turned out to be a woman they did not even

know the house became a gallery of whispers. Jerry stayed two or three steps behind

Katya as she crossed the room, so he was able to see the range of responses her

presence created. Envy, more than anything: particularly on the faces of women who

assumed they were Katya's contemporaries. Who was this woman who was as young or

younger than they were, prettier than they were, getting all the attention they

should have been getting?

On the faces of the young men, there was similar questions being silently

asked. Why is this damn woman more perfect than I am? Why does she have more eyes

undressing her than I do? Then there was that other contingent of young men who were

simply calculating their chances of getting across the room to her side with a drink

or a witty pickup line before the opposition.

Katya played it perfectly. She was careful not to lock eyes with anyone, so

that she didn't get caught up in a conversation she wanted no part of. She looked

back at Jerry, who pointed on across the room towards Todd.

And there he was, standing on the patio with Maxine. They were in the midst

of what looked to be a very unpleasant exchange. She was shaking her head, turning

away from him; he was following her, poking her in the shoulder like a kid who's not

getting his mother's full attention.

She ignored his importuning, and headed down a flight of stairs, which led

off the other side of the patio, down onto the beach.

The argument between Todd and Maxine had not gone unnoticed by the other

occupants of the room. Ever since Todd's appearance at the party, all other subjects

of whispered conversation had fallen by the wayside. It was Pickett the guests were

talking about. They were chiefly debating his wounded appearance, of course, but now

they were also discussing the way he stumbled in angry pursuit of Maxine, and the

subject of their exchange, which had unfortunately now been taken out of ear-shot.

There were plenty of people in the room who would have liked to have gone out onto

the patio and followed Todd and Maxine down onto the sand, but the only one who did

so was Tammy. She pushed through a group standing between her and the patio door,

maneuvered her way around a waiter and a sofa, and headed outside.

The wind had got up a little since she and Todd had arrived. It blew off the

ocean, bringing with it the sound of raised voices. Tammy heard Maxine's voice

first. She was demanding to know how Todd dared show his face-

Tammy crossed the patio to see if she could get a look at Todd. Did he need

her help or not? As she approached the wooden railing an officious little man, with

the improbable face of an ill-tempered troll, got in her way. "Excuse me, but who

the hell are you?"

"I'm a friend of Todd's. Are you the maitre d'?"

There was a barely-suppressed guffaw from one corner of the patio. Tammy

glanced round to see a young man, almost as well dressed as the troll, composing his

face.

"My name's Gary Eppstadt. I'm the Head of Paramount."

"Oh." Tammy said. "So?"

"So, you obviously don't belong on this patio."

"In point of fact, I think she did come with Todd," said another onlooker, a

woman in black, who was lounging against the railing as she sipped her cocktail.

Eppstadt looked Tammy up and down as though he was assessing a particularly

unappealing heifer. The nakedness of his look so infuriated her that she simply

Page 176

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

shoved him out of her way, and went to the railing.

"Get security," Eppstadt said. "I want this bitch thrown out or I shall lodge charges for assault."

"Oh, for God's sake, Gary," the woman said, "you're making a fool of yourself."

Only now did Tammy recognize the woman's soft drawl. It was Faye Dunaway.

Her weary glance fell momentarily on Tammy. "She's not doing any harm." Faye went

on, "Go inside and get yourself a drink." Tammy glanced back over her shoulder.

Eppstadt was obviously uncertain how to respond. He first threw a fiery glance at

Dunaway, who promptly threw it straight back. Then he snapped at one of the three

younger men doomed to be out here on the patio at the same time.

"Christian?"

"Yes, sir?"

"What did I just say?"

"That...you wanted security, sir?"

"And what are you doing?"

"Going to get them," the man said, hurrying away.

"Christ!" Dunaway murmured. "Didn't you hear what I said? She came in with

Todd."

"Well she doesn't belong in here," Eppstadt said. "With him or without him.

She's up to no good. Mind you, so's he. He wasn't invited either. I should have

security cart him away too."

Tammy turned from her spot at the railings.

"What is your problem?" she said. "This is nothing to do with you."

"Where the fuck did you come from?" he asked. "You look like a street-person. Is this Todd's idea of a joke? Bringing a street-person in

here?"

"Who are you, honey?"

"My name's Tammy Lauper, and I'm a friend of Todd's."

Eppstadt cut in here. "Friend in the sense of-?"

"Friend as in friend," Tammy said. "Todd's been going through some hard

times recently."

"No? Do tell."

"I'm afraid I'm not at liberty-"

"He's working you, honey," Faye said. "He knows all about the bad surgery.

The whole town does."

"As it happens I suggested the surgeon," Eppstadt said. "Bruce Burrows. He

normally does first-rate work. Didn't he do some for you, Faye?"

"No," said Ms. Dunaway. "I don't need it yet."

"My mistake."

"But when I do I'll be sure to avoid him, judging him by what he did to

Todd. That boy used to be damn-near perfect. The way Warren was perfect fifty years

ago. I mean, they were uncanny, both of them."

Tammy didn't bother to listen to the rest of the conversation. Instead she

slipped down the creaking wooden steps that led off the patio and

down onto the

sand. The wash of light from the house lit the beach as far as the surf, which was

breaking quite boisterously. The beach, as far as she could see, was immaculately

dean. No doubt the residents hired somebody to vacuum every morning, so that nothing

unpredictable—a whiskey bottle, a stray condom, a dead fish—be allowed to disfigure

the perfection of their stretch of coastline.

The only items she could see on the beach were two human figures.

If either Todd or Maxine had realized that Tammy was there they gave no sign

of it. They simply kept up what they'd been doing for the last ten minutes: arguing.

The wind carried most of their words away, but every now and again a phrase

would reach Tammy's eyes. Maxine called him a 'waste of time' at one point, 'all ego

and no brains' at another. He called her 'a talentless bitch' and 'a parasite'. She

mentioned, by way of response to one of his assaults that 'the whole town knows you

got a face-lift, and that it went to hell.'

"I don't care," Todd replied.

"Then you're even more of a fool than I thought you were," Maxine yelled

back, "because that's your fucking reputation out the window."

"Watch my lips," Todd said, pointing to his mouth. "I don't care."

Several exchanges followed of which Tammy did not catch a single word. She

continued to approach the pair slowly, expecting at any moment to be seen by one or

the other. But they were too deeply involved in expressing their rage at one another

Page 177

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

to take notice of her.

The conversation had definitely changed direction, however, because now,

when the wind brought fresh words in Tammy's direction, the subject of the Canyon

was under debate. And Todd was shouting.

"You set me up! You knew something weird was going on up there and you set

me up!"

It was time to make this into a three-way conversation, Tammy decided,

stepping into Maxine's line of sight. But Maxine wasn't going to be distracted from

the subject at hand by Tammy.

"All right," she said to Todd. "So the house has a history. Is that such a big deal?"

"I don't like messing with that stuff, Maxine. It's not safe."

"By that 'stuff' you mean what exactly?"

Todd dropped his voice to a near-whisper, but Tammy was close enough to hear

it. "The Canyon's full of dead people."

Maxine's response was to laugh; her laughter unfeigned. "Are you high?"

"No."

"Drunk?"

"No." Todd wasn't about to be laughed off. "I've seen them, Maxine. I've

touched them."

"Well then you should file a report to the National Enquirer, not come whining to me about it. As far as I'm concerned, this is our last conversation."

"I want an explanation!"

"I'll give you one," Maxine said: "You're crazy."

"Jerry?"

Katya was at Jerry's side, her expression troubled. "Is there a way down

onto the beach along the side of the house?"

"I don't know. Maybe. Why?"

"Todd's down on the beach, being abused by that bitch of a manager."

"I'm sure he can stand up for himself."

"I just want to take him away, and I don't want to have to come back through

the crowd when I bring him back."

"Well let's see," Jerry said. He took hold of Katya's arm and together they

went back to the front door.

"I hate these people," Katya said, when they reached the foyer.

"You don't know any of them," Jerry said. "With respect."

"Oh believe, me I do. They're the same old whores, fakes and fools. Only the

names have changed."

"Will you be leaving?" the valet wanted to know as they emerged from the

house.

"No," Jerry said. "I was just showing my friend around the house. Do you

know if there's a way down onto the beach?"

"Yes, of course. Just go back through the house-"

"We'd prefer not to go through the house."

"Well. I guess there's a pathway which runs down the side of the house,

which takes you to the beach. But it's much easier-"

"Thank you," Katya said, catching hold of the man's gaze and smiling at him.

"I'd just like to get away from the crowd."

If the man had any objections they faded away on the spot. He blushed at the

directness of Katya's look, and stood aside. "It's all yours," he said.

TEN

On the beach Todd looked up towards the house. The patio was now so crowded

with spectators that people had gone into the kitchen and up to the bedrooms so they

could look out at the beach and watch the exchange between himself and Maxine. A few

of the partiers had wandered down the patio, and were watching intently from there.

The general level of hubbub from inside had also dropped considerably. Word had got

around that a war of words was being fought on the sand, and if everyone would just

shut up for a minute or two, it would be more audible.

"You wish you'd never started this, now, don't you?" Maxine said.

"All I want is some answers."

"No, you don't. You want to embarrass me in front of my friends because I

Page 178

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

let you go. Well, Todd, I'd had enough of you. It's as simple as that. I was tired.

I wanted to be free of you and your endless demands." Maxine closed her eyes as she

spoke, and for the first time in her life Tammy had a morsel of sympathy for the

woman. Despite her makeup and her immaculate coiffure, nothing could disguise her

genuine exhaustion. When she said she wanted to be free of Todd, Tammy believed her.

"When I arranged for you to move into that house it was because it seemed to

serve your comforts. That was all I cared about. Now, you come here yelling and

swearing, and I think, to hell with your comforts. It's about time they all heard

the truth."

"Don't go there, Maxine."

"Why not? Why the hell not? You came here to cause trouble. Well you're

going to get trouble." She had raised her voice, so that she was now plainly audible

to the audience assembled on the patio and gathered at the windows.

Todd had nowhere to run. The closer she got to him, the more he was forced

to retreat towards the house, and the more audible her words became.

"Just tell the damn woman you're sorry, Todd," Tammy said. "And let's get

the hell out of here. This isn't the time or the place."

Maxine glanced at Tammy, conceding her existence here with them for the

first time. "You think he's going to apologize? To me? He doesn't understand the

word sorry. You know why? He's never been wrong. At least the way he tells it."

"Well, he can make an exception, right, Todd?"

"Keep out of this," Todd snapped.

"I hid you away in that house because you asked me to hide you away-" Maxine

went on, her recollections delivered in the direction of the spectators. "You needed

time to heal."

"I'm warning you," Todd said.

Maxine went on, unintimidated. "As I recall," she said, "your face looked

like a piece of hammered steak, thanks to Doctor Burrows."

"All right, you win," Todd said, "Just stop right there."

"Why? They already know the truth, Todd. The whole town's been gossiping

about your Phantom of the Opera act for weeks."

"Shut up, Maxine."

"No, Todd, I will not shut up. I've kept your fucking secrets for years, and

I'm not going to do it any longer."

"Perhaps we should just go, Todd," Tammy said.

"Don't waste your breath on him," Maxine said. "He's not going to sleep with

you. That's what you're hoping for, isn't it?"

"God," Tammy said. "You people."

"Don't deny it," Maxine snapped.

"Well, I am denying it. You think the world revolves around sex. It's pathetic."

"Anyway, I didn't," Todd said, as though he wanted to be sure that Maxine

was not misled on the subject.

Something about his eagerness to have this particular fact set straight

distressed Tammy. She knew why. He was ashamed of her. Damn him! Still concerned

about his stupid reputation.

Maxine must have seen the anger and disappointment on Tammy's face, because

the rage in her own voice mellowed. "Don't let him hurt you," she said. "He's not

worth it. Really he's not. It's just that he doesn't want them up there-" she jabbed

her finger in the direction of the house "-thinking he'd ever sink so low as to

sleep with the likes of you. Isn't that right, Todd? You don't want people thinking

you fucked the fat girl!"

The knife turned a second time in Tammy. She wished the beach would just

open up beneath her and swallow her, so she'd never have to see any

of these people

ever again.

But there was still enough self-esteem left in her to challenge the sonofabitch. What had she got to lose?

"Is that right, Todd?" she said. "Are you ashamed of me?"

"Oh Jesus..." Todd shook his head, then made a furtive glance at the house.

There were probably sixty people on the patio and balconies now, enjoying the

spectacle below.

"You know what?" he said. "Fuck both of you."

With that he turned his back on Tammy and Maxine and started to walk off

down the beach. But Maxine wasn't going to let him get away so easily. "We didn't

Page 179

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

finish talking about your healing, Todd."

"Leave it, Maxine-"

"The operation? The one to make you look a few years younger? The face-lift."

He swung around at her "I said: leave it or I will sue your fucking ass."

"On what grounds? I'm just telling the truth. You're an arrogant, spoiled,

talentless-"

Todd stopped his retreat. His face looked blotchy in the light thrown from

the house; there was a tic beneath the left side of his mouth. The expression of

empty despair on his mismade face silenced Maxine. Todd looked past both the women

at the crowd that was watching all this unfold.

Then he started to yell.

"Have you had enough! Well? Have you? She's right! It's all true! I did get

a fucking face-lift. You know why? That cunt! Eppstadt! Yes, you, you fucking

Quasimodo! You!"

Eppstadt had found a prime grandstand position to watch the encounter

between Todd and Maxine, so there were plenty of eyes turned in his direction now.

He didn't like the scrutiny any more than Todd had. He shook his head and waved

Todd's accusations away, then turned his back and tried to disappear into the crowd.

But Todd kept on haranguing him, "You're the freak here, you know that?"

Todd yelled. "You fuck with our lives, you fuck with our heads. Well, you're not

going to fuck with me any more, because I'm not playing your game anymore. Hear me?

"I'm not playing!"

Todd suddenly ran at the patio and reached up through the railing to catch

hold of Eppstadt's pants leg. Eppstadt turned on him.

"Get your hands off me!" he shouted, kicking at Todd as though he were a

crazed dog.

Todd simply pulled harder on his leg, so that Eppstadt had to grab hold of

somebody beside him to stop himself falling over. His face was white with fury. The

assault went to the very heart of his dignity; this was a living nightmare for him,

the mad dog actor, the audience of people who despised him, all drinking his

embarrassment down like a fine champagne.

"You ain't getting away so easy, ugly-boy!" Todd said, "We're all in this together."

"Pickett! Let go of me!" Eppstadt demanded. His voice had become shrill with

rage, beads of sweat popping out all over his face. "You hear me? Let me go!"

"When I'm done," Todd said. He pulled on Eppstadt again, dragging him a few

inches closer. "You miserable fucking shit. How many people have you told to get

their faces fixed, huh?"

"You were looking old," Eppstadt said.

"I was looking old? Ha! Look at you!"

"I'm not a movie-star."

"No, and neither am I. I'm over all that. You know why? I've seen where they

go, Eppstadt. All the beautiful people, the stars. I've seen where they end up."

"Forest Lawn?"

"Oh no. They're not in graves, Eppstadt. That's too easy. They're still out

there. The ghosts. Still thinking some fuck like you will give them another chance."

"Will somebody get this crazy sonofabitch off me?" Eppstadt shrieked.

One of the waiters went down on his haunches in front of the railing, took

hold of Todd's hands and started pulling off his fingers one by one. "You better let

go, man," the waiter quietly warned, "or I'm going to start hurtin' you. And I don't

want to do that."

Todd ignored him. He simply hauled on Eppstadt, which threw the older man

off-balance. The woman Eppstadt had been holding onto also toppled, and would have

come down hard had the crowd around her not been so thick. Eppstadt was not so

lucky, however. The people in his immediate vicinity had moved away

as soon as Todd

had caught hold of his leg. Down he went, catching the waiter a blow with his knee

as he fell, so that the other man was also sent sprawling.

Todd dragged Eppstadt towards the edge of the patio. There wasn't a single

witness to all of this who, knowing Eppstadt, didn't take pleasure in the indignity

they saw being visited on the man. People he'd scorned and made to look like fools,

were now all silently hoping this farce would escalate.

But Eppstadt was made of sterner stuff. He kicked at his attacker, the first

blow striking Todd's shoulder, the second hitting his nose and mouth, a brutal blow.

Page 180

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

Todd let go of Eppstadt and fell back on the sand, blood pouring from both nostrils,

like two faucets switched on full power.

Eppstadt scrambled to his feet, yelling: "I want that man arrested! Right

now! Right! Now!"

Todd looked up from his sprawl, his hand going to his face, coming away red.

A hundred faces now stared down at him. There wasn't a person at the party-whether

bartender, guest, waiter, toilet attendant or valet-who had not forsaken the house

to come out and see what all the hubbub was about. They were all staring down at the

famous, bloody face on the sand, and the sprawled Eppstadt on the patio. Scandal

didn't get much better than this; this was a story to dine out on for years.

A few people had come down onto the sand, on the pretext of helping Todd

perhaps but actually, of course, to see better what was going on and so have a

clearer account for later. Nobody lent Todd a hand; not even Tammy. She had

retreated some distance, unwilling to provide these witless fools with something

else to laugh at.

Todd scrambled to his feet without help, and instinctively turned his back

on his audience. They'd already seen and heard far more than he wanted them to see

or hear. All he wanted now was to get away from their snickering assessments.

"Fuck you all..." he muttered to himself, wondering which way he should go

along the beach, left or right?

And then, straight ahead of him, he had his answer. Standing there at the

water-line, watching him, was Katya.

At first he didn't believe it was really her. What was she doing so far from

her sanctuary? But if it wasn't her, then who?

He didn't wait for his senses to catch up with what his instinct already

knew. Without looking back at the ridiculous circus behind him he stumbled down the

beach towards her.

Despite all that Katya had done, all that she was associated with in Todd's

mind, her smile was welcome to him now: her madness infinitely preferable to that of

Eppstadt and the mob behind him. He was done with them. Forever. This last

humiliation was simply the final proof that he did not belong at this party any

longer. For better or worse, he belonged in the Canyon, with the woman standing at

the water's edge, beckoning to him.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

She smiled. Oh that smile; still an astonishment!

"What do you think? I came to find you."

"I thought you'd never leave the Canyon."

"Sometimes I surprise myself."

He put his arm around her. An ambitious wave came up around their legs and

filled his shoes with cold saltwater. He laughed, snorting through the blood. It

spattered her.

"God, I'm sorry. That's gross."

He went down on his haunches and brought a handful of water up to wash his

face, inhaling to cleanse his nostrils. The saltwater stung.

Katya came down to crouch in the surf beside him, her gaze going over his

shoulder.

"They're coming down from the house to get you," she warned.

"Fuck." He didn't need to glance back to confirm what she was saying.

Eppstadt would enjoy what came next, of course: having Todd arrested for assault,

hauled up before a judge. It would be headlines tomorrow; and attached to it every

detail of what Maxine had proclaimed to her guests. Burrows would be shooed out of

hiding, wherever he was, to tell his half of the story; or-if he chose to stand by

his Hippocratic oath and remain silent-then somebody would invent the details, or a

nurse would spill them. However it was verified (as though anything needed

verification) the secret was out.

But his story was only part of this. Katya? What about her secret? If they

got her into the spotlight as well as Todd, then the mystery of would become part of

tomorrow's headlines. The sanctuary would be violated by police and press; and when

they'd gone, by the public.

"I can't bear this," he said. He was ready to weep, for them both.

She took hold of his hand. "Then don't," she said.

She stood up, facing the sea, pulling on his hand so that he stood with her.

There were a few lights out there in the ocean, very remote. Otherwise it was

Page 181

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

completely dark.

"Walk with me," she said.

She couldn't mean: into the water?

Yes she did.

She was already walking, and he was following, not because he liked the idea

of striding off into the icy, roaring Pacific, but because the alternative-the

mockery of the audience on the shore; all the interrogations that awaited him-was

too much to contemplate. He wanted to be away from all that, and if the only

direction he could take led him into the ocean, then so be it. He had

her hand in

his. That was all he needed. For the first time in his life, that was all he needed.

"There are currents..." he said.

"I know."

"And sharks."

"I'm sure."

He almost looked back but stopped himself.

"Don't bother," she said. "You know what they're doing."

"Yes..."

"Staring at us. Pointing at us."

"Coming after us?"

"Yes. But not where we're going."

The water was up to Todd's waist now; and higher still on Katya, who was a

good six inches shorter than he. Though the waves weren't large tonight as they'd

been at the height of the storm, they still had sufficient power to throw them

backwards when they broke against their bodies. The force of one wave separated

them, and Katya was carried back to shore a few yards. Todd turned and went back to

get her, glancing up at the beach as he did so. Though they were probably less than

twenty-five yards out, the land already seemed very distant: a line of sand

scattered with people who'd come down to the water's edge to get a better view of

whatever was going on. And beyond them, the houses, all bright with lights; Maxine's

in particular. Down the path between the houses he could see the flashing yellow and

blue of a police-car. It would only be a matter of time, he thought, before they

sent a helicopter after them, with a searchlight.

He reached Katya and caught hold of her hand. The glimpse of land had filled

him with new determination.

"Come on," he said. "I'll carry you."

She didn't protest this; rather let him gather her up in his arms so that

they could continue their escape. He had become, he thought, a monster in an old

horror movie: grabbing the girl and carrying her off into the night. Except that it

was she who'd led him thus far. So that made them both monsters, didn't it?

She slipped her arms around his neck, and lay her head against his chest.

The water was so deep now that when the waves came and rifted them up, his toes no

longer touched the bottom. Curiously, he wasn't afraid. They were going to drown,

most probably, but what the hell? The water was so cold his body was already

becoming numb, and his eyelids felt heavy.

"Keep...hold...of me..." he said to her.

She pressed her mouth to his neck. She was warmer than he was, which for

some inexplicable reason he found amusing. She, who was so old, was the one with the

fever. The thought of that, of her body's heat, made him voice his one regret.

"We...never did it properly...in a bed, I mean."

"We will," she said, kissing him on the mouth.

Another wave came, larger than most that had preceded it, and picked them

both up.

They did not break their kiss, though the water closed over their heads.

On the shore, there was plenty of commotion, but Tammy kept away from the

heart of it, moving off down the beach. She had watched Todd and Katya getting

smaller and smaller, her panic growing. Now they were gone. Perhaps she just

couldn't make them out any longer, and they'd reappear in a moment, but she didn't

have very high hopes of that. There had been such determination in the way they'd

headed out into the darkness; plainly they weren't going out to enjoy a little swim,

then turn round and head back to shore. They were escaping together, in the only

direction left for them.

She had a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach: part horror at what she'd

just witnessed, part envy. He had made his choice, finally. And now, he was gone.

Page 182

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

She heard the throb of rotor-blades, and she looked up to see a police helicopter coming from the south, following the line of the surf as it approached

the place where the lovers had disappeared. Its powerful spotlight illuminated the

water with uncanny brightness.

Tammy looked back at the people assembled along the shoreline. Almost all

the guests had vacated the house and were milling around on the sand. She couldn't

see Maxine, but she could name a few famous folks, mainly from the color of their

clothes. Glenn Close was in white; Brad Pitt in a powder blue suit; Madonna was in

red. They were briefly illuminated by the flood of the search-light, then the

helicopter veered off seaward, and Tammy followed its progress as it swooped down

close to the water. Surely Todd and Katya couldn't have gone that far out. Even if

the current had caught them, they couldn't have been swept more than a few hundred

yards in the short time since they'd entered the water.

But then the current wasn't the only variable here, was it? There was also

their own ambition. They had gone out intending to be lost. And lost they were.

Suddenly, she was crying. Standing outside the wedge of light thrown by the

house, and beyond the presence of anyone who could possibly comfort her; dirty and

cold and alone, she sobbed like a baby. She made no attempt to stop the flood.

'Better out than in,' her mother had always said; and it was true. She could never

think straight when she had a bout of tears waiting in the wings. It was wiser to

just weep them out, and be done with them.

At last her grief began to subside, and she cleared the tears from her cheeks with her hands. The helicopter was now some distance from the shore, and had

dropped even closer to the water, hovering over one particular place. She tried to

make sense of the waterscape. Had the men in the helicopter located

the bodies? She

stared at the spotlight water until her eyes started to ache, but she could make no

sense of what she was seeing. Just the spume, being whipped up off the water, so

that it looked like snow in the column of white light.

After a few minutes the helicopter moved away from that position, turning

off its search-light for a while as it headed down the beach. When the light was

turned on again and the brightness struck the water the search had moved much

further out to sea. Still Tammy kept watching, desperately trying to make sense of

the sight. But at last it simply became too frustrating, and turning her back on the

water, she walked back up the side of the house to the street, where many of the

same people she'd seen down by the water earlier, enjoying the spectacle along with

their champagne, were now waiting to pick up their cars. They were quiet, eyes

downcast, as though they felt just a tiny prick of guilt at having treated the death

of one of their number as a spectator sport.

Whatever interest Tammy might once have had in these people was gone. The

fact that she was practically rubbing shoulders with Brad and Julia

and half-a-dozen

other luminaries was a matter of complete indifference to her. Her thoughts were

still out there in the dark waters of the Pacific.

Finally somebody spoke; some imbecilic remark about how valets were getting

slower every day. It was all this air-headed company needed to throw off their show

of introspection. Chatter sprang up, and on its heels, laughter. By the time Tammy's

car had arrived the group was in a fine mood, exchanging jokes and telephone

numbers; the scene on the beach-the tragedy they'd all just witnessed together-already a thing of the past.

ELEVEN

Along the beach a hundred and fifty yards from where Tammy was standing all

eyes were also directed seaward, and, like Tammy's eyes, saw nothing but the

uncanny, almost beatific, light from the hovering helicopter as it passed back and

forth over the surface of the water.

Eppstadt had his lawyer, Jacob Lazlov, on the line while he watched the

water. At his side, Maxine.

"I want this sonofabitch Pickett prosecuted to the full extent of the law,

Jacob. What do you mean: what did he do? He practically tore off my leg, that's what

he did. In public. Jesus, Jacob, it was an attack, a physical attack. And now the

bastard's trying to drown himself."

"Isn't this all a little premature?" Maxine remarked dryly. "He's probably

drowned by now."

"Then I'll sue his fucking estate. I can sue the estate can't I, Jacob?

Page 183

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

Speak up, I can't hear you. The helicopter-"

"You are a piece of work, you know that," Maxine said.

"I'll call you back, Jacob." Eppstadt snapped his phone closed and followed

Maxine back across the beach to the house. On the way they encountered the waiter

who'd come to Eppstadt's aid during Todd's attack.

"What's your name, son?"

"Joseph Finlay, sir."

"Well, Joe, I'd like you to do me a favor and stay within ten yards of me

till I tell you otherwise. Will you do that? I'll pay you very well for your

services. And if you see anything you don't like, son-"

"I'm there, sir."

"Good. Good. But you can start by getting me a brandy. Be quick." Joe hurried away. "Didn't you have any security at this damn party, Maxine?"

"Of course!"

"Well where the fuck was it when I was having my leg torn off? Jacob's going

to be asking some questions, Maxine, and you'd better have some damn good answers."

"Todd wasn't some trespasser-" Maxine said. She had reached the patio, and

now turned to face Eppstadt, tears filling her eyes. "I've known him ten years.

Everyone knows him."

"Well apparently none of us knew him well enough. He was ready to kill me."

"He was nowhere near killing you," Maxine said, weary of Eppstadt's self-dramatization. She sank down into the chair where she'd been sitting when Todd

had first arrived, turning it round so she could watch the beach.

"Your brandy, sir."

Eppstadt took his brandy. Joe pulled a chair up, and Eppstadt sat down in

it. "Ten yards," he said to Joe.

"I'm here."

Joe stepped back a little distance to give Eppstadt and Maxine a

measure of

privacy. Eppstadt took out a pack of cigarettes; offered one to Maxine, who took it

with trembling fingers. He lit both, and leaned back in his chair.

"Sonofabitch," he said. "Who'd ever have thought he'd pull a stunt like this?"

"I think it all got too much for him," Maxine said. "He cracked."

"No doubt. What was he talking about: some house you put him in?"

"Oh yes, that house," Maxine said. "It all began with that fucking house.

Where's Jerry Brahms?"

"Who?"

Maxine couldn't see Jerry, but she spotted Sawyer, her assistant, who was

inside the house, eating. He came at her summons, mouth stuffed with canapes. She

told him to find Jerry, pronto.

"I think we have to assume the current took them," Eppstadt said, directing

Maxine's attention at the helicopter, which had steadily moved further and further

out from the beach in its search. There were now two Coast Guard boats bobbing

around in the water, mounted with searchlights.

"Have people no taste?" Maxine said, surveying the condo on the beach. To

make matters worse, something of the party atmosphere had returned to the gathering.

The waiters were weaving amongst the guests, refreshing drinks or offering finger

food. It was not being refused. People seemed to be of the opinion that the

evening's drama was best viewed as part of the fun.

A waiter brought a platter to Maxine's side. "Sushi?" he said. She looked at

the array of raw fish with almost superstitious disgust.

"Oh God, why not?" Eppstadt said, a little too heartily. "In fact you can leave the platter."

"How can you eat?"

"I'm hungry. And if I were you, I'd keep me happy. Treat me very delicately." He examined the piece of yellow-tail in his fingers. "I suppose at this

point I could get all stirred up wondering what the fish was eating before it was

caught...but why wonder?"

Maxine got up from her chair and walked over to the railing. "I always thought you liked Todd."

"I thought he was acceptable company up to a point. But then he got full of

himself, and he became impossible. Your handiwork, of course."

"What?"

"Telling him he was the next best thing to sliced bread, when all along he

Page 184

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

was just another pretty face. And now not even that, thanks to Doctor Burrows." He

picked up a second piece of sushi. "I tell you, if Todd is dead, then he's done the

best thing he could do for his reputation. I know how that sounds, but it's the

truth. Now he's got a crack at being a legend. If he'd lived, grown old, everyone

would have realized he couldn't act his way out of a damp paper bag. And it would

have made us all look like fools. You for representing him, me for spending all that

money on him over the years."

"Maxine?"

Sawyer was leading a stricken Jerry up onto the patio. At some point in the

recent past his rug had become partially unglued and now sat off-center on his head.

"Todd's gone," he said.

"We can't be sure yet, Jerry. Sawyer, get Mr. Brahms a scotch and soda.

Light on the scotch. Jerry, this is Mr. Eppstadt, from Paramount."

"I'm familiar..." Jerry said, his gaze going from Eppstadt as soon as

he'd

laid eyes on him, and drifting off again towards the water. "It's useless. I don't

know why they keep searching. They've been swept away by now."

"The house, Jerry."

"What?"

"In the Canyon," Eppstadt said. "I've been hearing about it from Maxine."

"Oh. I see. Well...there's not a lot I can tell you. I just used to go there as a child. I was an actor, you see, when I was much younger."

"And were there other children there?"

"No. Not that I remember, at least. Just a woman called Katya Lupi-who took

me under her wing. She's the one..." he pointed out towards the waterline "...who

took Todd."

"No, Jerry," Maxine said. "Whoever that woman was, she was young."

"Katya was young."

"This girl looked twenty-five."

"Katya looked twenty-five." He accepted his scotch and soda from Sawyer.

"She wasn't, of course. She was probably a hundred."

"Then how the hell can she have looked twenty-five?" Eppstadt demanded.

Jerry had two words by way of reply.

"Coldheart Canyon."

Eppstadt had no reply to this. He just stared at Brahms, bewildered.

"She looks young," Jerry said. "But she isn't. That was her out there, no

doubt about it. Personally, I think it was some kind of a suicide pact between

them."

"That's ridiculous!" Maxine snorted. "Todd's got his whole life in front of

him."

"I think he may have been more desperate than you realized," Jerry said.

"Perhaps if you'd been a little better as friends, he'd still be with us."

"I don't think it's very useful to toss that kind of accusation around,"

Eppstadt said. "Especially when we don't know the facts."

"I think the facts are very plain," Jerry said. "I still read Variety." He pointed at Maxine. "You decided to give up on representing him, when he was having

difficulties with his career. And you-" now the accusatory finger went in Eppstadt's

direction "-cancelled a movie which he had his heart set on. Not to mention the fact

that you-" the finger returned to Maxine "-just made a public display of humiliating

him. Is it any wonder he decided to put an end to his life?"

Neither accusee attempted a defense. What was the use? What Jerry had said

was a matter of public record.

"I want to see this Canyon," Eppstadt said. "And the house."

"The house has nothing to do with any of this," Jerry said. "Frankly, I suggest you keep your distance from it. You've already-"

Eppstadt ignored him. "Where is it?" he demanded of Maxine.

"Well I've never been able to find it on a map but the Canyon runs parallel

with Laurel Canyon. I don't think it's even got a proper name."

"Coldheart Canyon," Brahms said again. "That's what they used to call it in

the Silent Era. Because she was supposed to have such a cold heart,

you see."

"You know your way there?" Eppstadt asked Maxine.

"I...suppose I could find my way...but I'd prefer somebody to drive me."

"You," Eppstadt said. It was his turn to point.

Jerry shook his head.

"It's either you taking me, or the police."

Page 185

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"Why'd you want to call the police?"

"Because I think there's some kind of conspiracy going on. You. Pickett. The

woman who went into the sea with him. You're all in this together."

"To do what, for God's sake?"

"I don't know: promote that asshole's career?"

"I assure you-"

"I don't care to hear your assurances," Eppstadt said. "I just need you to

take me to this Canyon of yours."

"It's not mine. It's hers. Katya's. If we went there we'd be trespassing on

her property."

"I'll take that risk."

"Well I won't."

"Maxine, tell him he's coming."

"I don't see why you want to go," Jerry pleaded.

"Let's just make Mr. Eppstadt happy right now, shall we?"

"I just don't want to trespass." Jerry said again.

"Well you can blame me," Eppstadt said. "Tell this Lupi woman-if she ever

surfaces again-that I forced you to take me. Where's the waiter? Joe!"

Eppstadt's makeshift bodyguard came over. "We're going to make a little

field-trip. I'd like you to come with us."

"Oh? Okay."

"Maxine, do you have a gun?"

"I'm not going with you."

"Yes you are, m'dear. A gun. Do you have one?"

"Several. But I'm not going. I've had enough excitement for one night. I

need some sleep."

"Well here's your choices. Come now and let's find out what the hell's going

on up there, together. Or sit tight and wait for my lawyer to call you in the

morning."

Maxine looked at him blankly.

"Do I take that as a yes?" he said.

There were five in the expedition party. Maxine's assistant Sawyer, armed

with one of Maxine's guns, drove Maxine. And in a second car, driven by Jerry, went

Eppstadt and Joe. The larger of Maxine's guns, a .45, was in Eppstadt's possession.

He claimed he knew how to use it.

By the time they had left many of the party-goers had already drifted away,

leaving a hard core of perhaps thirty-five people, many of them still on the beach,

waiting to see if anything noteworthy was going to happen. About fifteen minutes

after Eppstadt's expedition had departed for the hills the Coast Guard called off

the helicopter. There had been a boating accident up the coast-nine people in the

water-and air support was urgently needed. One of the two search boats was also

called off, leaving the other to make wider and wider circles as any hope that the

lost souls were still alive and close to the shore steadily grew more remote, and

finally, faded entirely.

PART EIGHT

THE WIND AT THE DOOR

ONE

The night was almost over by the time the two cars bearing Eppstadt's little

expeditionary force made their way up the winding road that led into Coldheart

Canyon. The sky was just a little lighter in the east, though the clouds were thick,

so it would be a sluggish dawn, without an ounce of the drama which had marked the

hours of darkness. In the depths of the Canyon itself, the day never truly dawned

properly at all. There was a peculiar density to the shadows between the trees

today; as though the night lingered there, in scraps and rags. Day-blooming flowers

would fail to show themselves, even at the height of noon; while plants that would

normally offer sight and scent of themselves only after dark remained awake through

the daylight hours.

None of this was noticed by Eppstadt or the others in his party; they were

not the sort of people who noticed things to which so little value could be readily

attached. But they knew something was amiss, even so, from the moment they stepped

Page 186

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

out of their vehicles. They proceeded towards the house exchanging

anxious looks,

their steps reluctant. Even Eppstadt, who had been so vocal about seeing the Canyon

when they'd all been down in Malibu, plainly wished he'd not talked himself into

this. Had he been on his own he would undoubtedly have retreated. But he could

scarcely do so now, with so many people watching. He could either hope that

something alarming (though inconsequential) happened soon, and he was obliged to

call, a general retreat in the interest of the company, or that they'd get into the

house, make a cursory examination of the place, then agree that this was a matter

best left with the police, and get the hell out.

The feeling he had, walking into the house, was the same feeling he

sometimes got going onto a darkened sound stage. A sense of anticipation hung in the

air. The only question was: what was the drama that was going to be played out here?

A continuation of the farce he'd been so unwillingly dragged into on the beach? He

didn't think so. The stage was set here for some other order of spectacle, and he

didn't particularly want to be a part of it.

In all his years running a studio he'd never green-lit a horror movie, or

anything with that kind of supernatural edge. He didn't like them. On the one hand,

he thought they were contemptible rubbish; and on the other, they made his flesh

creep. They unnerved him with their reports from some irrational place in the

psyche; a place he had fled from all his life. The Canyon knew that place, he

sensed. No, he knew. There were probably subjects for a hundred horror movies here,

God help him.

"Weird, huh?" Joe remarked to him.

Eppstadt was glad he'd brought the kid along. Though Eppstadt didn't have a

queer bone in his body there was still something comforting about having a

big-boned, Mid-Western dumb-fuck like Joe on the team.

"What are we looking for, anyhow?" Joe asked as Maxine led the way into the

house.

"Anything out of the ordinary," Eppstadt replied.

"We don't have any right to be here," Maxine reminded him. "And if Todd is

dead, the police aren't going to be very happy that we touched stuff."

"I get it, Maxine," he said. "We'll be careful."

"Big place," Joe said, wandering into the lounge. "Great for parties."

"Let's get some lights on in this place, shall we?" Eppstadt said. He'd no

sooner spoken than Sawyer found the master panel, and flipped on every one of the

thirty switches before him. Room after dazzling room was revealed, detail after

glorious detail.

Jerry had seen the dream palace countless times over the years, but for some

reason, even in its early days when the paint was fresh and the gilding perfect,

he'd never seen the house put on a show quite like this. It was almost as if the old

place knew it didn't have long to live and-knowing its span was short-was making the

best of the hours remaining to it.

"The woman on the beach," Eppstadt said. "She built this place?"

"Yes. Her name was Katya Lupi and-"

"I know who she was," Eppstadt replied. "I've seen some of her movies.

Trash. Kitsch trash."

It was impossible, of course, that the woman who'd built this Spanish

mausoleum was the same individual who'd escorted Todd Pickett into the surf. That

woman might have been her grandchild, Eppstadt supposed, at a stretch; a

great-grandchild more likely.

He was about to correct Brahms on his generational details when a chorus of

yelping coyotes erupted across the Canyon. Eppstadt knew what coyotes sounded like,

of course. He had plenty of friends who lived in the Hills, and considered the

animals harmless scavengers, digging through their trash and occasionally dining on

a pet cat. But there was something about the noise they were making now, as the sun

came up, that made his stomach twitch and his skin crawl. It was like a soundtrack

of one of the horror movies he'd never green-lit.

And then, just as suddenly as the chorus of coyotes had erupted, it ceased.

There were three seconds of total silence.

Then everything began to shake. The walls, the chandelier, the ancient floorboards beneath their feet.

"Earthquake!" Sawyer yelled. He grabbed hold of Maxine's arm. She screeched,

and ran for the kitchen door.

"Outside!" she shrieked. "We're all safer outside!"

Page 187

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

She could move fast when she needed to. She dragged Sawyer after her, down

to the back door. Jerry tried to follow, but the shaking in the ground had become a

roll, and he missed his handhold.

Joe, Mid-Western boy that he was, had never experienced an earthquake

before. He just stood on the pitching ground repeating the name of his savior over

and over and over again, in perfect sincerity.

It's going to stop any minute, Eppstadt thought (he'd lived through many of

these, big and small), but this one kept going, escalating. The floor was undulating

in front of him. If he'd seen it in dailies he would have fired the physical effects

guy for creating something that looked so phony. Solid matter like wood and nails

simply didn't move that way. It was ludicrous.

But still it escalated, and Joe's calls to his savior became shouts:

"Christ! Christ! Christ! Christ!"

"When's it going to stop?" Jerry gasped.

He'd given up trying to rise. He just lay on the ground while the rattling

and the rolling continued unabated.

There was a crash from an adjacent room, as something was thrown over. And

then, from further off, a whole succession of further crashes, as shelves came

unseated, and their contents were scattered. A short length of plaster molding came

down from the ceiling and smashed on the ground a foot from where Eppstadt was

standing, its shards spreading in all directions. He looked up, in case there was

more to come. A fine rain of plaster-dust was descending, stinging his eyes.

Meanwhile, the quake continued to make the house creak and crack on all sides,

Eppstadt's semi-blinded condition only making the event seem all the more

apocalyptic. He reached towards Joe, who was hoarse from reciting his one-word

prayer, and caught hold of him.

"What's that noise?" the kid yelled over the din.

It seemed like a particularly witless question in the midst of such a

cacophony, but interestingly, Eppstadt grasped exactly what the kid was talking

about.

There was one sound, amongst the terrifying orchestration of groans and

crashes from all over the house, that was deeper than all the others, and seemed to

be coming from directly beneath them. It sounded like two titanic sets of teeth

grinding together, grinding so hard they were destroying themselves in the process.

"I don't know what it is," admitted Eppstadt. Tears were pouring from his

eyes, washing them dear of the plaster-dust.

"Well I want it to fucking stop," Joe said with nice Mid-Western directness.

He'd no sooner spoken than the noise in the earth started to die away, and

moments later the rest of the din and motion followed.

"It's over..." Jerry sobbed.

He'd spoken too soon. There was one last, short jolt in the ground, which

brought a further series of crashes from around the house, and from below what

sounded like a door being thrown open so violently it cracked its back against the

wall.

Only then did the noises and the deep-earth motion finally subside and die

away. What was left, from far off, was the sound of car alarms.

"Everybody okay?" Eppstadt said.

"I'll never get used to those damn things," Jerry said.

"That was a big one," Eppstadt said. "6.5 at least."

"And it went on, and on..."

"I think we should just get the hell out of here," Joe said.

"Before we go anywhere," Eppstadt said, venturing into the kitchen, "we wait

for any aftershocks. We're safer inside than out there right now."

"How do you figure that?" Joe said, following Eppstadt into the kitchen.

It was chaos. None of the shelves had come off the walls, but they'd been

shaken so violently they'd deposited their contents on the tiled floor. A cabinet

holding booze had been shaken down, and several of the bottles broken, filling the

air with the sharp tang of mingled liquors. Eppstadt went to the refrigerator-which

had been thrown open by the quake, and had half its contents danced off the

shelves-and found a can of Coke. He cracked it carefully, letting its excitability

fizz away by degrees, then poured it as though this sickly soda was a hundred year

old brandy, and drank.

"Better," he said.

"I'll take one of those," Joe remarked.

Page 188

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"What colour do I look?"

Scowling, Joe kicked his way through the fractured crockery to the refrigerator, and got himself a Coke.

"What the hell happened to Maxine?" Eppstadt wondered.

"She went out back with Sawyer," Joe said, averting his face from a fan of

erupting Coke.

Eppstadt went out into a passageway that led down to an open door, kicking a

few pieces of fallen plaster out of the way as he went.

"Maxine!" he called. "Are you okay?"

There was no reply.

Without waiting for anyone to join him, he headed down to the back door.

There was more plaster dust underfoot, and several large cracks in the walls and

ceiling. Unlike other areas of the house this portion looked less solid to his eye,

and very much less elegant. A hurried later addition, he guessed, and probably more

vulnerable to shocks than the older parts of the house. He called out for Maxine

again, but again there was no reply forthcoming. He wasn't surprised. The area just

outside the door looked squalid; large masses of rotted vegetable matter covered the

walkway on the other side of the threshold, giving off a sickly stench. The foliage

overhanging the area was so thick that the area was practically benighted.

He went to the threshold, intending to call for Maxine again, but before he

could do so he heard the sound of low, sibilant laughter. Since childhood he'd

always been certain that laughter heard in his vicinity was laughter heard at his

expense, and even though his therapist had worked hard for sixteen years to dissuade

him of this neurosis, it lingered. He narrowed his eyes, trying to make sense of the

shadows beneath the trees; dividing form from apparition. Obviously, the laughter

had a source, perhaps more than one. He just couldn't make it out.

"Stop that," he ordered.

But the laughter continued, which enraged him. They were laughing at him, he

was certain of it. Who else would they be laughing at? Bastards.

He stepped over the threshold, ready to sue. The air was cold and clammy.

This wasn't a very pleasant house, he'd decided very quickly, and this was a

particularly unpleasant corner of it. But the laughter continued, and he couldn't

turn his back on it, not until he'd silenced it.

"Who the hell are you?" he demanded. "This is private property. You hear me?

You shouldn't even-"

He stopped now because there, in the shadow of a humongous Bird of Paradise

tree, he made out a human form. No, two. No, three. He could barely see their

features, but he could feel the imprint of their stares upon him.

And then more laughter, mocking his protests.

"I'm warning you," he snapped, as though he were talking to children.
"Get

away from here. Go on! Get away!"

But instead of stopping, the addled laughter grew louder still, and its owners decided to step out from under the shade of the Bird of Paradise. Eppstadt

could see them more dearly now. They were indeed trespassers, he guessed, who'd been

up here partying the night away. One of them, a very lovely young woman (she

couldn't have been more than seventeen, to judge by the tautness of her skin) was

bare-breasted, her brunette hair wet and pressed to her skull. He vaguely thought he

knew her; that perhaps as a child actress she'd been in a movie he'd produced over

at Paramount, or during his earlier time at Fox. She was certainly developing into a

beautiful woman. But there was something about the way she stepped out of the

shadows-her head sinking down, as though she might at any moment drop to the ground

and imitate some animal or other-that distressed him. He didn't want her near him,

even with her tight skin, her lovely nubs of nipples, her pouty lips.
There was too

much hunger in her eyes, and even if he wasn't the focus of that
appetite, he didn't

want to be caught between such a mindless hunger and its object of
desire, whatever

it might be.

And then there were the others, still lurking close to the tree behind
her.

Wait, there were more than two. There were a host of others, whose
gaze he now felt

on him. They were everywhere out here, in this uncertain dawn. He
could see the

foliage moving where some of them had slunk, their naked bellies flat
on the ground.

And they were up in the branches too; rotted blossoms came down to
add to the muck

that slickened the Mexican pavers underfoot.

Eppstadt took a tentative backward step, regretting that he'd ever
stepped

out of the house. No, not just that. At that moment he was regretting
the whole

Page 189

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

process of events that had brought him to this damned house in the
first place.

Going to Maxine's asinine party; having that witless argument with
Pickett; then the

interrogation of Jerry Brahms and the choice to come up here. Stupid, all of it.

He took a second backward step. As he did so the eyes of the exhibitionist

girl who'd first appeared became exceptionally bright, as though something in her

head had caught fire. Then, without warning, she broke into a sudden run, racing at

Eppstadt. He turned back towards the door, and in the instant that he did so he saw

a dozen-no, two dozen-figures who'd been standing camouflaged in the murk break

their cover and join her in her dash for the door.

He was a step from reaching the threshold when the young bitch caught hold

of his arm.

"Please-" she said. Her fingers dug deep into the fat where healthier men

had biceps.

"Let me go."

"Don't go in," she said.

She pulled him back towards her, her strength uncanny. He reached out and

grabbed the doorjamb, thinking as he did so that he'd got through the last

twenty-five years of his life without anyone laying an inappropriate hand upon him,

and here he was in the midst of his second such indignity in the space of

twenty-four hours.

The woman still had fierce hold of him, and she wasn't about to let him go-

"Stay out here," she implored.

He flailed away from her. His Armani shirt tore, and he seized the moment to

wriggle free. From the corner of his eye he saw a lot of faces, eyes incandescent,

converging on the spot.

Terror made him swifter than he'd been in three decades. He leapt over the

threshold, and once he got inside, he turned on a quarter, throwing all his weight

against the door. It slammed closed. He fumbled with the lock, expecting to feel

instant pressure exerted from the other side.

But there was none. Despite the fact that the trespassers could have pushed

the door open (smashed it open, lock and all, if they'd so chosen) they didn't. The

girl simply called to him through the door, her voice well-modulated, like that of

someone who'd been to a high-grade finishing school:

"You should be careful," she said, in an eerie sing-song. "This house is going to come down. Do you hear me, mister? It's coming down."

He heard; he heard loud and clear. But he didn't reply. He simply bolted the

door, still mystified as to why they hadn't attempted to break in, and ran up the

passageway back to the kitchen. Before he reached the door Joe rounded the corner,

coming in the opposite direction, gun in hand.

"Where the hell were you?" Eppstadt demanded.

"I was just about to ask you the same-"

"We're under siege."

"From what?"

"There are crazy people out there. A lot of crazy, fucking people."

"Where?"

"Right outside that door!"

He pointed back down the passageway. There was nothing visible through the

glass panel. They'd retreated in four or five seconds, taking refuge in the murk.

"Trust me," Eppstadt said, "there's twenty or thirty people waiting on the

other side of that door. One of them tried to drag me out there with them." He

proffered his torn shirt and bloodied arm as proof. "She was probably rabid. I

should get shots."

"I don't hear anybody," Joe said.

"They're out there. Trust me."

He went back to the kitchen, with Joe on his heels.

Jerry was running water into the sink, and splashing it on his temple.
Joe

went straight to the window to see if he could verify Eppstadt's story,
while

Eppstadt snatched a handful of water to douse his own wound.

"The line's down, by the way," Jerry said.

"I've got my portable," Eppstadt said.

"They're not working either," Joe said. "The earthquake's taken out the
whole system."

"Did you see Maxine or Sawyer out there?" Jerry said.

"I never got out there, Brahms. There are people-"

Page 190

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"Yes I know."

"Wait. Turn off the water."

"I haven't finished washing."

"I said: turn it off."

Brahms reluctantly obeyed. As the last of the water ran off down the
pipes,

another cluster of noises became audible, rising from the bowels of the
house.

"It sounds like somebody left a television on down there," Joe said,

splendidly simple-minded.

Eppstadt went to the door that lead into the turret. "That's no television,"

he said.

"Well what the hell else would it be?" Joe said. "I can hear horses, and wind. There's no wind today."

It was true. There was no wind. But somewhere, it was howling like the

soundtrack on Lawrence of Arabia.

"You'll find this place gets crowded after a while," Jerry said

matter-of-factly. He patted dry the wound on his face. "We shouldn't be here," he

reiterated.

"Who are they out there?" Eppstadt said.

"Old movie stars mainly. A few of Katya's lovers."

Eppstadt shook his head. "These weren't old. And several of them were women."

"She liked women," Jerry said, "On occasion. Especially if she could play

her little games with them."

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Joe said.

"Katya Lupi, who built this house-"

"Once and for all-" Eppstadt said, "these were not Katya Lupi's lovers. They

were young. One of them, at least, looked no more than sixteen or seventeen."

"She liked them very young. And they liked her. Especially when she'd taken

them down there." He pointed to the turret door through which the sound of

storm-winds were still coming. "It's another world down there, you see. And they'd

be addicted, after that. They'd do anything for her, just to get another taste of

it."

"I don't get it," Joe said.

"Better you don't," Jerry replied. "Just leave now, while you still can. The

earthquake threw the door open down there. That's why you can hear all the noise."

"You said it was coming from some other place?" Joe said.

"Yes. The Devil's Country."

"What?"

"That's what Katya used to call it. The Devil's Country."

Joe glanced at Eppstadt, looking for some confirmation that all this was

nonsense. But Eppstadt was staring out of the window, still haunted by the hungry

faces he'd met on the threshold. Much as he would have liked to laugh off what Jerry

Brahms was saying, his instincts were telling him to be more cautious.

"Suppose there is some kind of door down there..." he said.

"There is, believe me."

"All right. Say I believe you. And maybe the earthquake did open it up.

Shouldn't somebody go down there and close it?"

"That would certainly make sense."

"Joe?"

"Aw shit. Why me?"

"Because you're the one who kept telling us how good you are with a gun.

Anyway, it's obvious Jerry's in no state to go."

"What about you?"

"Joe," Eppstadt said. "You're talking to the Head of Paramount."

"So? That doesn't mean a whole heap right now, does it?"

"No, but it will when we get back to the real world." He stared at Joe, with

an odd little smile on his face. "You don't want to be a waiter all your life, do

you?"

"No. Of course not."

"You came to Hollywood to act, am I right?"

"I'm really good."

"I'm sure you are. Do you have any idea how much help I could be to you?"

"If I go down there-?"

"And close the door."

Page 191

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"Then you make me a movie star?"

"There are no guarantees in this town, Joe. But put it this way. You've got

a better chance of being the next Brad Pitt-"

"I see myself more as an Ed Norton."

"Okay. Ed Norton. You stand a better chance of being the next Ed Norton if

you've got the Head of Paramount on your side. You understand?"

Joe looked past Eppstadt at the doorway that led to the turret. The noise of

the storm had not abated a jot. If anything the wind had become louder, slamming the

door against a wall. If it had just been the whine of the wind coming from below no

doubt Joe's ambitions would have had him halfway down the stairs by now. But there

were other sounds being carried on the back of the wind, some easy to interpret,

others not so easy. He could hear the screech of agitated birds, which was not too

distressing. But there were other species giving voice below: and he could put a

name to none of them.

"Well, Joe?" Eppstadt said. "You want to close that door? Or do you want to

serve canapes for the rest of your life."

"Fuck."

"You've got a gun, Joe. Where's your balls?"

"You promise you'll get me a part? Not some stinking little walk-on?"

"I promise...to do my best for you."

Joe looked over at Jerry. "Do you know what's down there?"

"Just don't look," was Jerry's advice. "Close the door and come back up.

Don't look into the room, even if it seems really amazing."

"Why?"

"Because it is amazing. And once you've looked you're going to want to go on

looking."

"And if something comes out after me?"

"Shoot it."

"There," said Eppstadt. "Satisfied?"

Joe turned the proposition over in his head for a few more seconds, weighing

the gun in his hand as he did so. "I've been in this fucking town two, almost three,

years. Haven't even got an agent."

"Looks like this is your lucky day," Eppstadt said.

"Better be," Joe replied.

He drew a deep breath, and went out into the hallway. Eppstadt smiled

reassuringly at him as he went by, but his features weren't made for reassurance. In

fact at the sight of Eppstadt's crooked smile, Joe almost changed his mind. Then,

thinking perhaps of what his life had been like so far-the casual contempt heaped on

waiters by the famous-he went out to the head of the stairs and looked down.

Reassuringly, the door had stopped slamming quite so hard. Joe took a deep breath,

then he headed down the flight.

Eppstadt watched him go. Then he went back to the window.

"The people out there..." he said to Jerry.

"What about them?"

"Will they have harmed Maxine?"

"I doubt it. They don't want blood. They just want to get back into the house."

"Why didn't they just push past me?"

"There's some kind of trap at the door that keeps them out."

"I got in and out without any problem."

"Well, you're alive, aren't you?"

"What?"

"You heard what I said."

"Don't start with the superstitious crap, Brahms. I'm not in the mood."

"Neither am I," Jerry said. "I wish I was anywhere but here, right now."

"I thought this was your dream palace?"

"If Katya were here, it would be a different matter."

"You don't really think that woman on the beach was Katya Lupi, do you?"

"I know it was her for a fact. I drove her down to Malibu myself."

"What?"

Jerry shrugged. "Playing Cupid."

"Katya Lupi and Todd Pickett? Crazy. It's all crazy."

"Why? Because you refuse to believe in ghosts?"

"Oh. I didn't say that," Eppstadt replied, somewhat cautiously. "I didn't

Page 192

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

say I didn't believe. I've been to Gettysburg and felt the presence of the dead. But

a battlefield is one thing-

"And an old Hollywood dream-palace is another? Why? People suffered here,

believe me. A few even took their own lives. I don't know why I'm telling you. You

know how people suffer here. You caused half of it. This miserable town's awash with

envy and anger. You know how cruel LA makes people? How hungry?"

The word rang a bell. Eppstadt thought of the face of the woman at the back

of the house. The appetite in her eyes.

"They might not be the kind of ghosts you think you hear moaning at

Gettysburg," Jerry went on. "But believe me, they are very dead and they are very

desperate. So the sooner we find Maxine and Sawyer and get out of here the better

for all of us."

"Oh dear God," Eppstadt said softly.

"What?"

"I'm starting to believe you."

"Then we've made some progress, I suppose."

"Why didn't you tell me all this before we came up here?"

"Would it have stopped you coming?"

"No."

"You see. You needed to see for yourself."

"Well, I've seen," Eppstadt said. "And you're right. As soon as Joe's closed

the door, we'll all go out and find Maxine and Sawyer. You're sure those things-

"Use the word, Eppstadt."

"I don't want to."

"For God's sake, it's just a word."

"All right...ghosts. Are you sure they won't come after us? They looked vicious."

"They want to get into the house. It's as I said: that's all they care about. They want to get back into the Devil's Country."

"Do you know why?"

"I've half a notion, but I don't fancy sharing it with you. Shall we not waste time standing around trying to guess what the dead want?" He returned his gaze

to the expanse of green outside the window.

"Well all of us know sooner than we care to."

TWO

At 5:49 A.M., when the 6.9 earthquake (later discovered to have had its

epicenter in Pasadena) had shaken Los Angeles out of its pre-dawn doze, Tammy had

been standing on the nameless street outside Katya Lupi's house in Coldheart Canyon,

drawn back to the place with an ease that suggested she had it in her blood now, for

better or worse.

She had left the party at the Colony a few minutes after the departure of

Eppstadt's expedition, having decided that there was little point in her waiting on

the beach. If Todd and Katya were still in the water then they were dead by now,

their corpses carried off by the tide towards Hawaii or Japan. And if by some

miracle they had survived, then they surely wouldn't go back to Maxine's house. They

would head home to the Canyon.

Her initial plan was to give up on this whole sorry adventure, return to the

hotel on Wilshire, shower, change into some fresh clothes and then get the first

available flight out of Los Angeles. She'd done all she could for Todd Pickett. More

than he deserved, Lord knows. And what had she got for her troubles? In the end,

little more than his contempt. She wasn't going to put herself in the way of that

ever again. If she wanted to cause herself pain all she had to do was bang her head

against the kitchen door. She didn't need to come all the way to Los Angeles to do

that.

But as she drove back to the hotel, fragments of things that she'd seen in

the Canyon, and later in the house, came back to her; images that inspired more awe

in her soul than terror. She would never get another chance to see such sights this

side of the grave, certainly; should she not take the opportunity to go back, one

last time? If she didn't go now, by tomorrow it would be too late. The Canyon would

have found new protections against her-or anybody else's-inquiry; new charms and

mechanisms designed to conceal its raptures from curious eyes.

And, of course, there was always the remote possibility that Todd had

Page 193

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

survived the ocean and made his way back up there. That, more than any other, was

the strongest reason to return.

Her decision made, she drove on up to Sunset-forgetting about the shower and

change of clothes-and made her way back to the Canyon.

No doubt it was foolhardy, returning to a place where she had endured so

much but, besides her desire to see the spectacles of the place one last time, an

putting aside any hopes she might have for Todd's survival, she could not shake the

niggling suspicion that her business at the house was not at an end. She had no

intellectual justification for such a feeling; just a certainty, marrow-

deep, that

this was the case. She'd know when it was over. And it was not.

It had been an eerie drive up the winding Canyon road in the pre-dawn gloom.

She had deliberately switched off her headlights so as to attract as little

attention as possible, but that made her feel even more vulnerable somehow; as

though she was not quite real herself, here in this Canyon of a Thousand Illusions.

Twice something had moved across the road in front of her, its grey form

unfixable in the murk. She put on the brakes, and let the creature cross.

Once she got to the house she realized she was not the first visitor. There

were two cars already parked outside. She was crossing the street to examine the

other two when the earthquake hit.

She'd been in earthquakes before, but she'd never actually been standing so

close to the bedrock while one took place. It was quite an experience. She almost

lost control of her bladder, as the road idled under her feet, and the trees,

especially the big ones, creaked and churned. She stood and waited for the first

shock wave to pass, which seemed an eternity. Then, when her heart

had recovered

something approximating its natural rhythm, she headed towards Katya Lupi's dream

palace.

Eppstadt was in the hallway, looking down the stairwell. It was dark at the

bottom, but he thought he saw a motion in the darkness; like motes of pale dust,

spiraling around.

"Joe?" he called. "Are you there? Answer me, will you?"

The sound from below had died away: the din of beasts was now barely

audible. All that remained was the sound of the wind, which was remarkably

consistent, lending credence to the notion that what he was hearing was a

soundtrack, not reality. But where the hell had Joe got to? It was fully five

minutes since he'd disappeared down the stairs to close the slamming door.

"I wouldn't go down there if I were you."

Eppstadt glanced over his shoulder to see that Brahms had forsaken his place

at the window, and had come into the hallway.

"He doesn't answer me," Eppstadt said. "I thought perhaps he'd fallen, or...I don't know. The door's still slamming. Hear it?"

"Of course."

"I don't suppose you want to go down there and close it for me?"

"You're big on delegation, aren't you? Do they teach you that in business

school?"

"It's just a door."

"So close it yourself."

Eppstadt threw Brahms a sour look. "Or don't. Leave him down there if that's

what your instincts are telling you."

"And if I do?"

"Put it this way: the longer you wait, the less chance there is you'll ever

see him again."

"I should never have sent him down there," Eppstadt said.

"Huh. I never thought I'd hear that from you."

"Hear what?"

"Regret. This place is changing you. Even you. I'm impressed."

Eppstadt didn't reply. He simply stared down the long curve of the stairway,

still hoping he'd see Joe's well-made face emerging from the shadows. But the only

motion down there was the dust stirred up by the wind, circling on itself.

"Joe!" he yelled.

There wasn't even an echo from below. The bowels of the house seemed to

consume the shouted syllable.

"I'm going upstairs," Jerry said, "to see if there's anybody up there."

"Is Maxine still out back?"

Page 194

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"I assume so. And if I remember from previous quakes she'll stay out there a

while. She doesn't like being under anything, even a table, during a 'quake. She'll

come in when she's ready."

"Thanks."

"You're welcome."

"You don't like me, do you?" Eppstadt said out of nowhere.

Jerry shrugged. "Hollywood's always had its share of little Caligulas."

So saying, he left Eppstadt to his dilemma, and went on up the stairs. He

knew the geography of the house pretty well. There were three doors that led off the

top landing. One went to a short passageway, which led in turn to a large bedroom,

with en suite bathroom, which had been occupied, until his death, by Marco Caputo.

One was a small writing room. And one was the master bedroom, with its astonishing

view, its immense closet and sumptuous, if somewhat over-wrought, bathroom.

Jerry had only been in the master bedroom two or three times; but it held

fond memories for him. Memories of being a young man (what had he been, twelve,

thirteen at the most?) invited in by Katya. Oh, she'd been beautiful that night; it

had been like lying in the bed of a goddess. He'd been too frightened to touch her

at first, but she'd gently persuaded him out of his fears.

As his life had turned out, she'd been the only woman he'd ever slept with.

In his early twenties he was certain his queerness was a result of that night. No

other woman, he would tell himself, could possibly be the equal of Katya Lupi. But

that was just self-justification. He'd been born queer, and Katya was his one grand

exception to the rule.

As he reached the door of the master bedroom, there was an aftershock. A

short jolt, no more; but enough to set the antiquated chandelier that hung in the

turret gently swaying and tinkling again. Jerry waited for a few moments, holding

onto the banister, waiting to see if there were going to be any more shocks coming

immediately upon the heels of this one. But there were none.

He glanced down the stairwell. No one was in view. Then he tried the bedroom

door. It was locked from the inside. There was only one thing to construe from this:

the room had an occupant, or occupants. He glanced down at the shiny boards at his

feet, and saw that there were a few droplets of water on the polished timber.

It wasn't hard to put the pieces of this puzzle together; nor to imagine the

scene on the other side of the locked door. Todd and Katya had survived their brush

with the Pacific. They were alive; sleeping, no doubt, in the great bed. The voyeur

in him would have liked very much to have slid through the closed door and spied on

the lovers as they slept; both naked, Todd lying face up on the bed, Katya pressed

to his side. She was probably snoring, as he'd heard her do several times when she'd

catnapped in his presence.

He didn't blame Katya for her covetousness one iota. If being hungry for

life meant being hungry for an eternity of nights wrapped in the arms of a man who

loved you, then that was an entirely understandable appetite.

And there was just a little part of him which thought that if he stayed

loyal to her long enough-if he played his part-then she would let him have a piece

of her eternity. That she would show him how the years could be made to melt away.

He retreated from the door, and headed downstairs, leaving the sleepers to

their secret slumber.

When he got to the mid-level landing Eppstadt had gone. Apparently, he'd

made the decision to do downstairs and look for Joe. Jerry looked over the balcony.

There was no sound from below. The wind had died away to nothing. The door was no

longer slamming.

He went from the stairs to the front door, which stood ajar.

Perhaps this was his moment to depart. He had nothing more to contribute

here. Katya had her man; Todd had found some measure of peace after his own

disappointments. What else was there for Jerry to do, but make his silent farewells

and slip away?

He stood at the front door for two or three minutes, unable to make the

final break. Eventually, he convinced himself to just linger here a little longer,

simply to see the look on Maxine's face when she realized Todd was still alive. He

went back into the kitchen, and sat down, waiting-like anyone who'd spent their time

watching other lives rather than having one of their own-to see what happened next.

Eppstadt had been two steps from the bottom of the stairs when the aftershock hit. He was by no means an agile man, but he leapt the last two steps

Page 195

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

without a stumble. There were ominous growlings in the walls, as though several

hungry tigers had been sealed up in them. This was, he knew, one of the most foolish

places to be caught in an earthquake, especially if (as was perfectly possible) the

aftershock turned out not to be an aftershock at all, but a warm-up for something

bigger. It would be more sensible-much more sensible-to ascend the stairs again and

wait until the tigers had quieted down. But he wasn't going to do that. He'd been

sensible for most of his life; always taking the safe road, the conservative route.

For once, he wanted to play life a little dangerously, and take the consequences.

That said, he didn't have to be suicidal. There was a door-lintel up ahead.

He'd be safer under there than he was in the open passageway. He

made a dash for the

spot, and as he did so, the aftershock abruptly ceased.

He took a deep breath.

Then he glanced over his shoulder into the room behind him.
Presumably this

was the place Joe had disappeared into; there was nowhere else for
him to go.

He went to the door. Looked inside. He could see nothing at first, just
undivided gloom. He reached in, as many had done before him, to
fumble for a light

switch, and failing to find one, allowed a little surge of curiosity to
take hold of

him. Hadn't he said to himself he wanted to live a little more riskily?
Well, here

was his opportunity. Stepping into this strange room at the bottom of
this lunatic

house was probably the most foolish thing he'd ever done, and he
knew it.

A cold wind came to greet him. It caught hold of his elbow, and drew
him

over the threshold into the world-yes, it was a world-inside. He looked
up at the

heavens; at that three-quarter blinded sun, at the high herringbone
clouds that he

remembered puzzling over as a child, wondering what it was that laid
them out so

carefully, so prettily. A star fell earthward, and he followed its arc
with his

eyes, until it burned itself out, somewhere over the trees.

Far off, many miles beyond the dark mass of the forest, he could see the

sea, glittering. This was not the Pacific, he could see. The ships that moved upon

it were like something from an Errol Flynn flick, The Sea Hawk or some such. He'd

loved those movies as a kid; and the ships in them. Especially the ships.

It was twenty-six seconds since the man from Paramount, who'd spent his

professional life keeping the dreamy, superstitious child in him silenced by

pretending a fine, high-minded superiority to all things that smelt of grease-paint

and midnight hokum, had entered the Devil's Country; and had lost himself in it.

"Come on, don't be afraid, the wind from the sea whispered in his ear.

And in he went, all cynicism wiped from his mind by the memory of wheeling

ships beneath a painted sky, still young enough to believe he might grow up a hero.

THREE

Todd stirred from a state closer to a stupor than a sleep. He was lying on

the immense bed of the master bedroom in the house in Coldheart Canyon. Katya was

lying beside him, her little body gathered into a tight knot, pressed

close to him.

One arm was beneath him, the other on top, as though she'd never let him go of him

again. She was snoring in her sleep, as she had been that day he'd found her in her

bedroom at the guest-house. The human touch. It was more eloquent now than ever,

given what they'd gone through together.

There had been some terrifying moments for them both in the last few hours;

fragments of them played in Todd's head as he slowly extricated himself from her

embrace, and slid slowly out of the bed. First, there'd been that breath-snatching

moment when he'd turned his back on the Malibu house and headed out into the dark

waters of the Pacific with Katya. He'd never been so frightened in his life. But

then she'd squeezed his hand, and looked around at him, her hair blowing back from

her face, showing off the glory of her bones, and he'd thought: even if I die now, I

will have been the luckiest man in creation. I will have had this woman by my side

at the end. Who could ask for more than that?

It hadn't been quite so easy to hold on to those feelings of gratitude in the chaotic minutes that followed. Once they were out of their depth, and in the

grip of the great Pacific, the bitter-sweet joy of what they were doing became a

shared, instinctive attempt to survive in the dark, bruising waters.
Fifty yards

out, and the big waves, the surfers' waves, started to pick them up and drop them

down again into their lightless troughs. It was so dark he could barely see Katya's

face, but he heard her choking on seawater, coughing like a frightened little girl.

And suddenly the idea of just dying out here, beaten to death by the waves,

Page 196

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

didn't seem so attractive. Why not try to live, he found himself thinking? Not the

kind of life he'd had before (he wouldn't want that again, ever) but some other kind

of life. Travelling around the world, perhaps, incognito; just the two of them. That

wouldn't be so bad, would it? And when they were bored with travel they could find

some sunny beach down in Costa Rica and spend every day there drunk amongst the

parrots. There they could wait out the years until the big, glossy world he'd once

given a shit for had forgotten he even existed.

All these thoughts came in flashes, none of them really coherent. The

only

thought that took any real shape was the means by which they could escape this dark

water alive.

"We're going to dive!" he yelled to Katya. "Take a deep breath."

He heard her do so; then, before another pulverizing wave could come along

and knock them out he drove them both into a teetering wall of water, diving deep

into the placid heart of the wave. They must have done this half a hundred times;

diving down, rising up again gasping, then watching for the next monstrous wall to

be almost upon them before diving again. It was a desperate trick, but it worked.

It was dearly preventing them from getting a terrible beating, but it was

steadily taking its toll on their energies. He knew they couldn't continue to defy

the violence of the water for very much longer. Their muscles were aching, their

senses were becoming unreliable. It would only be a matter of time before the force

of the water got the better of them, and they sank together, defeated by sheer

fatigue.

But they had counted without the benign collusion of the tide, which all

this time had been slowly bearing them south, and-as it did so-had been also

ushering them back towards the shore. The tumult of waters around them began to die

down, and after a few minutes their toes began to brush some of the taller coral

towers. A few minutes later they had solid ground beneath their feet, and a few

minutes after that they were stumbling ashore at Venice.

For five minutes or so they lay on the dark sand together, spitting up water

and coughing, and then eventually finding it in them to laugh, and catch each

other's hands.

Against all the odds, they'd survived.

"I guess we...we weren't ready...to die," Todd gasped.

"I suppose so," Katya said. She dragged her head over the sand, to put her

lips in reach of his. It wasn't a kiss, so much as a sharing of breath. They lay

there, mouth to mouth, until Katya's teeth began to chatter.

"We have to get you back to the Canyon," he said, hauling himself to his

knees. The lights of the Venice boardwalk seemed impossibly remote.

"I can't," she said.

"Yes you can. We're going home. We're going back to the Canyon. You'll feel

stronger and warmer once we're walking. I promise."

He helped her get to her knees and then practically lifted her to her feet.

Arms around one another they stumbled towards the boardwalk, where the usual

tourist-trap entertainments were still going on, despite the lateness of the hour.

They wove between the people, unrecognized, and in a back street Todd found a kid

with a beaten up Pinto to whom he offered three hundred waterlogged bucks if he'd

take them back home, and another three hundred, dry, if he promised not to mention

what he'd done and where he'd been, to anyone.

"I know who you are," the kid said.

"No you don't," Todd said, snatching the three hundred back from the kid's

hand.

"Okay, okay. I don't," the kid replied, gently reclaiming the money.

"You

gotta deal."

Todd knew that there wasn't much chance that the driver's promise would last

very long, but they had no choice in the matter. They made their makeshift chauffeur

close all the windows and turn up the heating, and they clung together in the back

of the car trying to get some warmth back into their blood. Todd got him to drive as

fast as the vehicle was capable of going, and twenty minutes later he was directing

the kid up the winding road into Coldheart Canyon.

"I've never been up here before," the kid said when they were outside the

house.

Katya leaned in and stared at him.

"No," she said. "And you never will again."

Something about the way she said it made the kid feel very nervous.

Page 197

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"Okay, okay," he said. "Just give me the rest of the money."

Todd went inside for another three hundred dollars in dry bills, and a few

minutes later the guy drove off six hundred bucks the richer, and none the wiser,

while Todd and Katya dragged themselves up the turret stairs to the master bedroom,

sloughing off their cold damp clothes as they crept towards the bed they'd thought

they'd never see again.

It took Todd a long time to get across the bedroom to the closet: his body

ached to his marrow, and his thoughts were as sluggish as his body.

Only as he was

pulling on a clean pair of jeans did he realize there were voices in the house.

"Shit..." he murmured to himself.

He decided not to wake Katya. Instead he would try to get rid of these people himself, without unleashing her righteous fury on them.

He went back into the bedroom. Despite the hullabaloo from below Katya

showed no sign of waking. This was all to the good. She was obviously hearing the

hurts of recent days. He lingered at the bedside, studying her peaceful features.

The seawater had washed every trace of rouge or mascara from her face; she could

have been a fifteen-year-old, lying there, dreaming innocent dreams.

Of course that innocence was an illusion. He knew what she was capable of;

and there was a corner of his brain that never completely ceased warning him of that

fact. But then hadn't she come to the beach to save him? Who else would have done

that, except perhaps for Tammy? All anybody had ever done for him was use him, and

as soon as they'd got what they'd needed, they'd moved on. But Katya had proved she

was made of more loyal stuff. She'd been ready to go all the way with him; to death

if necessary.

So what if she was cruel? What if she had committed crimes that would have

had her behind bars if anybody knew about them? Her sins mattered very little to him

right now. What mattered was how she'd taken his hand as they'd turned their back on

the lights of the beach and faced the dark waters of the Pacific; and how hard she'd

struggled to keep holding onto it, however much the tide had conspired to divorce

them.

The voices below had quieted.

He pulled on a white T-shirt, and went to the door. As he did so there was a

small earthquake. The door rattled in its frame. It was a short jolt, and he guessed

it was probably an aftershock. If so, then perhaps what had woken him in the first

place was the big shaker. Why else would he have woken? He was still very much in

need of sleep, God knows. Nothing would have given him more pleasure than to strip

off his jeans and T-shirt and crawl back into bed beside Katya for another three or

four hours of blissful slumber.

But he could scarcely do that with a search party in the house. He heard

Eppstadt's voice amongst the exchanges. Fuck him! It was typical that the little

prick would get his nose in their business sooner or later. Todd had hoped that he

and Katya would get some quiet time together to plan their next move: to search the

house (and of course the Pool House) for incriminating evidence of scandal, and

destroy it; then to hide in the depths of the Canyon until the investigators were

satisfied that there was nothing here worth investigating, and left, taking Eppstadt

and whoever the hell else was here (Maxine, no doubt) back with him. But Eppstadt

had ruined that hope. Before these interlopers left they were going to search every

damn room, no doubt of that: the master bedroom included. He was going to need to

find a way to spirit Katya and himself out of the house and away before they came

looking.

He listened at the door and then very gingerly unlocked it and opened it an

inch. He could hear an exchange from below, which seemed to be led by Eppstadt.

Jesus-of all people to be up here amongst Katya's mysteries: Mister Bottom-line

himself, Gary Eppstadt. There was no sign of an opinion from Maxine, which was

unusual. She was normally vocal in any debate, however little she knew about the

subject. Then Todd remembered her phobia about quakes. She always fled for the open

air at the first sign of a trembler, and no doubt she'd done exactly that. He was

tempted to go onto the balcony and see if he could spot her in the back yard-just to

see the bitch in a state of agitation-but there wasn't time. There was too much

going on downstairs. He ventured out of the bedroom a step, and peered over the

rail, in time to see somebody-it was a young man, either a waiter brought from the

party, or one of Maxine's new boys (or both), heading down the spiral into the

darkness down there, where a door was banging.

Page 198

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

Next he heard footsteps, and felt certain that Eppstadt was about to appear

from the kitchen door. Before he was spotted, Todd slid back into the bedroom, and

gently closed the door. It made a barely perceptible click; certainly nothing

audible with so much else going on in the vicinity.

He knew what that banging door was all about. The earthquake had thrown open

the door to the Devil's Country, and it looked as though Eppstadt had convinced some

dope to go down and close it. Idiots! Didn't they have any instincts? Didn't

something whisper at the back of their heads that when a door slammed in this house,

you let it slam, you let it slam till it chose to stop. What you didn't do was head

on down the stairs to close it. That was suicide, or the next best thing.

He put his head around the corner and peered into the bedroom. Katya was

still fast asleep. He briefly contemplated waking her, then thought better of it.

All her life she'd had men following her around asking what they should do next. He

wasn't going to be numbered amongst them.

No, he would deal with this on his own. After all, the house was going to be

his home as much as it was hers. His word should be law here. He just had to work

out how best to proceed, and without a shot of espresso to quicken his sluggish

thoughts, it might take a while. No matter, the answer would come to him, in time.

He sat with his back against the wall, and tried to put out of his head the

image of the innocent stranger heading down the spiral staircase to close the door

to the Devil's Country.

FOUR

Todd stayed put behind the door for several minutes, his thoughts describing

vague circles. In truth he was still hoping that it would not take any action on his

part to fix the problem. The preferable solution would be this: somebody (perhaps

Maxine, out there in the back yard) would encounter something that would raise the

panic-level in the house, and there would be a mass exodus. Perhaps it was too much

to hope for, but every other option (diversions, locating keys to side exits)

required a higher degree of wit than he possessed in his present exhausted state.

He finally got up from behind the door and returned through the bedroom,

past his sleeping beauty, to the balcony. He stepped out. The dull dawn had ushered

in a dull day. Later, perhaps, the marine layer would burn off and they'd have some

sun, but for now, the sky was a wall of dead cloud. He looked down into the

greenery, hoping to spot Maxine, but the thickness of the jungle all around the

house-especially the gigantic bird-of-paradise trees-made it virtually impossible to

see very much.

And then, out of the corner of his eye, he glimpsed a motion.
Somebody was

running through the thicket, throwing panicked backward glances as
he went. It

wasn't Maxine, it was her assistant Sawyer, who'd been with her for
the last three

years. He wasn't any more than thirty, but he'd let his body get out of
shape. Too

many hurried lunches, snatched because Maxine had more work for
him than he could

ever possibly finish; too much after-work socializing, knocking back
his single

malts and beluga at fancy premieres; not to mention the Bavarian
creme-filled donuts

he would bring into the office in boxes of six, to help him through his
day with a

well-timed sugar rush.

Thanks to the donuts and hamburgers, and his neat scotches, he
couldn't run

very fast. And he certainly couldn't yell for help while he was running:
he didn't

have enough breath for both. All he could do was sob between gasps,
throwing

panicking glances over his shoulder. His pursuers were closing on him.
Todd could

see the bushes thrashing around immediately behind him; and
something else-something

smaller and more nimble-was throwing itself from branch to branch overhead, to keep

up with its quarry.

"M...Max...Maxine!" He managed to get out, in between gasps.

"I'm over here!" Maxine yelled. "Sawyer! I'm at the cages!"

Todd followed the sound of Maxine's voice, and located her. She was a considerable distance from the house, and had clambered up on top of one of a series

of cages. There she was kneeling, with a gun in her hand. She'd always kept guns

around the house, Todd knew, but this was the first occasion he'd seen her using

one.

"Keep following my voice," she yelled to Sawyer. "Look for a tree with bright yellow flowers, like big bells-"

"I'm looking!" Sawyer sobbed.

Page 199

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

From his vantage point on the balcony, Todd felt like a Caesar at the Coliseum, watching the lions and the Christians. He could see the Christians

perfectly clearly, and now-as the gap between the pursuer and the pursued closed-he

began to glimpse the lions too.

In the bushes no more than a yard or two behind Sawyer was one of

dead's

children: a foul hybrid of ghost woman and-of all things-jaguar. The latter must

have been a prisoner in Katya's menagerie, but the marriage of anatomies had turned

its sleek perfection into something rougher, uglier and entirely more bizarre. The

human element had been female; no doubt of that. The face-when Todd glimpsed it-was

two-thirds humanoid. The high cheekbones, the icy stare: it was surely the face of

Lana Turner. Then the creature opened its mouth, and the bestial third showed

itself: vast teeth, top and bottom, a mottled throat, a black tongue. It let out a

very unladylike roar, and pounced on Sawyer, who threw himself out of its path with

inches to spare.

"Are you okay?" Maxine yelled.

All that Sawyer could manage was: "No!"

"Are you close to me?" Maxine said.

"I can't see you," he cried. The branches over his head were shaking violently.

"Look for the yellow flowers."

"...yellow...flowers..."

It would have been easy for Todd to direct Sawyer through this maze,

but

that would have taken all the fun out of it. Better to keep his silence and let the

man find his own way. It was the kind of game he knew Katya would love. He was

tempted to wake her, but it would be over in the next few seconds, he guessed.

Sawyer was a few yards from the cages, and safety. Having failed to catch its victim

on its first pounce, the Lana, as Todd had mentally dubbed the creature, had

returned to her stalking. Todd caught glimpses of her mottled back as she slid

through the thicket. Her intentions were clear, at least from Todd's point of view.

She was moving to cut Sawyer off from the gallery of cages. Sawyer and Maxine kept a

banal exchange going meanwhile, so that Sawyer could find his way to her.

"You're getting louder."

"Am I?"

"Sure. You see the yellow flowers, yet?"

"Yeah. I see them."

"You're really close."

"I'm under them-"

He stopped talking because he heard the low growl of the Lana. Todd could

hear the creature too, though he couldn't see it. He silently willed Sawyer not to

make any sudden moves; just stand still, shut up, and maybe the animal would lose

interest. Sawyer could stand still without any problem, but could he shut up? No, he

could not. Sawyer was a gabber. "Oh God, Maxine. Oh God. It's close to me."

"Shush," Maxine advised.

He stopped talking, but it was too late. The Lana knew exactly where Sawyer

was positioned. She launched herself out of the thicket, striking Sawyer so that he

fell sideways, through the very patch of yellow flowers which had been his beacon.

He was now in view of Maxine, who yelled to him to get up, get up quickly-

He started to do so, but the breath had been knocked out of him by the blow,

and before he could get to his knees the creature was on him a second time, her

claws digging deep into the mass of his shoulder-muscle.

From her perch on the cage Maxine was attempting to get a clear shot, but it

would have been difficult for anyone, however sophisticated their skill with guns,

to put a bullet in the animal and not wound Sawyer in the process. But Maxine was

ready to give it a try. She'd been taking lessons from an ex-cop from the LAPD for

several months; she knew to keep a steady hand and her eye fixed on the target.

Sawyer couldn't have moved if his life had depended upon it. The creature

had him held in a death-grip.

Maxine fired. The sound was sharp in the still air of the Canyon, like a whip-crack. It echoed off the other wall of the Canyon, the blow of the bullet

throwing Sawyer's attacker off her victim. She lay, this not-so-distant relation to

the exquisite Miss Turner, on the ground beside Sawyer, whom she'd loosed as soon as

she was hit. Blood ran copiously from them both, mingling on the ground between

them.

"Get up," Maxine said to Sawyer.

Page 200

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

It was good advice. The Lana was still alive, her breathing quick and shallow.

Sawyer wasn't so badly injured that he failed to realize the danger he was

still in. He rolled away from his attacker and started to get to his feet. As he did

so the creature suddenly sat up beside him and opening her sizeable jaws, lunged.

She took a chunk from Sawyer's leg, twisting her head to take away the bulk of his

calf. He screamed, and fell forward onto his hands.

Maxine had a clear shot at the beast, and took it. But her second shot was

not as efficient as her first; it struck the creature's shoulder, passing through

the muscle without appearing to significantly slow the animal, which threw itself on

top of Sawyer as though she were attempting to mount him.

Seconds later, the Lana opened her mouth and sank her teeth into the bones

of Sawyer's skull. The man's sobs ceased instantly, and what little strength his

limbs had possessed fled. He hung beneath the Lana's body like a zebra's corpse from

the jaws of a lion, glassy-eyed and lifeless.

Todd heard Maxine say, "Oh Christ...oh Christ..."

But the horror wasn't over with yet. The creature apparently wanted to get

her teeth into her wounder, because having dispatched Sawyer she let the body drop

from her jaws and began to move towards the cage on which Maxine was crouched. Even

in her hurt state there was no doubt that she had the physical power to get up onto

the cage and attack Maxine. In fact, the wounds she had sustained didn't seem to be

hurting her that much; her hybrid face carried a look that was somewhere between an

animal snarl and a human smile. Maxine didn't hesitate. Taking a bead on the animal,

she fired. The bullet struck the creature in the middle of her face, taking out the

flat nose and the top half of the mouth.

For one long moment she seemed not to comprehend the fatal damage she had

sustained. She lifted her front leg, which ended in a hand which erupted into claws,

towards her face, almost as though she intended to explore the damage she had

sustained. But before her corrupted limb could reach her face the creature's system

closed down, and she fell forward, dead.

There had been a good deal of motion in the foliage throughout this episode;

Todd had the sense that there were several other creatures watching to see how this

proceeded before they showed their own faces. Now, with the death of Lana, the

thicket was still. Nothing moved; nothing breathed.

The only sound Todd could hear was the very soft sound of Maxine saying Oh

God to herself, over and over. She quickly got control of her horror

and her fear

and started to clamber down off the cage where she'd been perched.

Todd was half-tempted to call down to her, to offer some word of

encouragement, but he refrained from doing so. For one thing, he didn't want to

admit that he'd stood as a spectator to this whole drama; second, he was afraid of

distracting Maxine while she was down there. Certainly her killing of the creature

had silenced its brethren in the thicket, but their silence didn't mean they'd given

up their stalking. They were simply sitting in the shadows waiting for Maxine to

make a mistake, when no doubt they would fall upon her in a vengeful mob.

Thus, keeping his silence, Todd watched Maxine make her way between the

cages, glancing back at the house constantly, as though she was trying to find a

path that would lead her back to safety but was at present only able to find one

that ran parallel to the house. She was now thirty or forty yards from the cages,

which was a good thing, because that meant she couldn't see what was happening on

the walkway beneath them.

A minute or two after her exit, a few of Lana's family members appeared from

the thicket where-as Todd had known-they'd been waiting. Now about six of them came

out of hiding. They had no interest in the corpse of their sibling. It was Sawyer

they wanted. Surrounding his body they began to play with the corpse like children

with some gruesome toy. They tore off his clothes, and bit off his penis and balls.

They followed that by biting off fingers, knuckle by knuckle, and spitting the

pieces out. They seemed to take infantile pleasure in the mess they were making.

Todd was horribly disgusted by the spectacle, but he kept watching, until they were

finished with the fingers and began to disembowel the man. Only then did he retreat

from the balcony railing and go back inside.

It would not necessarily be easy for Maxine to find her way back up to the

house, he realized. Many of the pathways were overgrown, and in her present, no

doubt panicked, state of mind, she could easily lose her way and keep on losing it.

He would have to go outside and find her.

Page 201

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

Katya was still sleeping. The shots hadn't even stirred her. Indeed, she

seemed to have scarcely moved, so profound was her slumber. Her hand was still up at

her mouth, limply curled round on itself.

He kissed her, saw that this did not wake her either, and left her to her

slumbers.

FIVE

Eppstadt was in the Devil's Country. A fine drizzle, almost a mist, was drooping from the bloated clouds; it came in soft waves against his face, cooling

his flushed skin. If he doubted the reality of this place, its chill seemed designed

to undo his doubt.

He hated the idea that what he was witnessing was real; doing so violated

all his logical faculties. But what was the alternative? That he'd slipped and

fallen, and was now lying at the bottom of the stairs in a semi-comatose state,

imagining all this? It was a pretty solution, but as he had no way of knowing

whether it was true or not: his only option was to find Joe, and get the hell out of

here before the place began to get even crazier than it already was. The less he

knew about this country-the less its grotesqueries lodged in his psyche-the happier

the rest of his life would surely be.

With that thought he began a three hundred and sixty degree scanning of the

landscape, calling Joe's name as he did so. His din (even his simple presence) was

enough to stir life in the bushes and trees. He felt himself watched by several

species of unlikely animal, their eyes huge and luminous, their postures, and in

some cases the details of the physiognomies, vaguely human, as though this twilight

world had witnessed all kinds of criminal couplings.

Finally, he heard a response from Joe.

"Who's there?"

"Eppstadt."

"Come over here. Quickly. You gotta help me."

He followed the sound of the man's shouting. There was a small copse ahead,

and Joe had clambered a few feet into a tree by means of a crude wooden ladder which

had been propped against one of the trunks.

"What the hell are you doing?" Eppstadt wanted to know.

Joe simply repeated his plea: "You gotta help me."

"There's no time, Joe," Eppstadt said, "You've got to come back with me.

Right now. Christ, I sent you down to close the door. Why'd you come

in?"

"For the same reason you did," Joe said. "I couldn't believe what I was seeing. Are you going to help me or not?"

Eppstadt had pressed his way into the midst of the thicket as he and Joe

spoke, snagging his suit on the briars that grew in profusion here several times as

he did so. The tableau that now came into view appalled him.

There was a man crucified amongst the higher branches of the tree Joe had

climbed, the deed done with both rope and nails. Joe had already managed to remove a

couple of the nails (spattering his arms and face with blood in the process) and was

now pulling at the knotted rope with his teeth. He was desperate to get the man down

from the tree, and he had reason. The branches around the man's head were bustling

with birds, the Devil's Country's version of carrion-crows: bigger, crueler

versions. They'd clearly made several assaults on the man's face already. There were

deep gouges around the victim's sockets where the birds had gone after his eyes.

Blood from the wounds poured down his face. He might have resembled Christ but for

the brightness of his blond hair, which fell in dirty curls to his shoulders.

"I need a stone!" Joe yelled down at Eppstadt.

"What for?"

"Just find me a fucking stone, will you?"

Eppstadt didn't like to take orders-especially from a waiter-but he saw the

urgency of the situation, and did as he was asked, looking around until he laid his

hands on a long, sharp stone, which he passed on up to Joe. From his perch on the

ladder, Joe took aim at the closest of the carrion crows. It was a good throw. The

stone struck the most ambitious of the flock-who had apparently decided to come in

for the kill-and messily smashed open the bird's head, but its companions did not

fly off, as Joe had hoped. They simply retreated up the tree a branch or two,

squawking in fury and frustration, while the dead bird dropped from the perch.

As if awoken from a grateful sleep by the din of the birds, the crucified

Page 202

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

man raised his head, and opened his mouth. A black snake, no thicker than a baby's

thumb, slid out from between his lips in a thin gruel of blood, spittle and bile.

The snake dangled from the man's lower lip for a few moments, hooked by its tail.

Then it fell to the ground, a foot from Eppstadt.

He stepped away in disgust, throwing a backward glance at the door, just to

reassure himself that his means of escape from this insanity was still in view. It

was. But the snake had changed his perspective on this mercy mission.

"The guy's on the way out," Eppstadt said to Joe. "You can't do anything for

him."

"We can still get him down."

"And I'm telling you he's beyond help, Joe. Look at him."

There did indeed seem little purpose in laboring to depose the man; he was

obviously close to death. His eyes had rolled back beneath fluttering eyelids,

showing nothing but white. He was attempting to say something, but his mind and his

tongue were beyond the complex business of speech.

"You know what?" Eppstadt said, glancing around the landscape. "This is a

set-up." There were indeed dozens of hiding places for potential attackers-human or

animal-within fifty yards of them: rocks, holes, thicket. "We should just get the

hell out of here before whoever did this to him tries the same on us."

"Leave him, you mean?"

"Yes. Leave him."

Joe just shook his head. He had succeeded in getting this far, and wasn't

going to give up now. He pulled on the rope that held the man's right hand. The arm

fell free. Blood pattered on the leaves over Eppstadt's head, like a light rain.

"I'm almost done," Joe said.

"Joe, I-"

"Get ready," Joe said again, leaning across the victim's body to untie the

other hand. You're going to have to catch him," he warned Eppstadt.

"I can't do that."

"Well who else is going to do it?" Joe snapped.

Eppstadt wasn't paying attention, however.

He'd heard a noise behind him, and now he turned to find that a freakish

child, naked and runty, had appeared from somewhere, and was looking up at him.

"We've got company," he said to Joe, who was still struggling to free the

crucified man's other hand.

When Eppstadt looked back at the freak, it had approached a few steps, and

Eppstadt had a clearer view of it. There was something goatish in the

gene-pool,

Eppstadt decided. The child's bandy legs were sheathed with dirty-yellow fur, and

his eyes were yellow-green. From beneath the pale dome of his belly there jutted a

sizeable erection, which was out of all proportion to the rest of his body. He

fingered it idly while he watched.

"Why are you taking the man down?" he said to Joe. Then, getting no answer

from Joe, directed the same question at Eppstadt.

"He's in pain," was all Eppstadt could find to say, though the phrase scarcely seemed to match the horror of the victim's persecution.

"That's the way my mother wants him," the goat-boy said.

"Your mother?"

"Lil-ith," he said, pronouncing the word as two distinct syllables. "She is

the Queen of Hell. And I am her son."

"If you're her son," Eppstadt said, playing along for time until a better way to deal with this absurdity occurred, "then it follows, yes...she would be your

mother."

"And she had him put up there so I could see him!" the goat-boy replied, the

head of his pecker echoing his own head in its infuriated nodding.

The angrier he became, the more the evidence of his extreme in-breeding

surfaced. He had a hair-lip, which made his outrage harder to understand, and his

nose-which was scarcely more than two gaping wet holes in his face, ran with

cataharral fluids. His teeth, when he bared them, were overlapped in half a dozen

places, and his eyes were slightly crossed. In short, he was an abomination, the

only perfect piece of anatomy he'd inherited that monstrous member between his legs,

which had lost some of its hardness now, and hung like a rubber club between his

rough-haired legs.

"I'm going to tell my mother about you!" he said, stabbing a stunted forefinger in Eppstadt's direction. "That man is a crinimal."

Page 203

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"A crinimal?" Eppstadt said, with a supercilious smirk. The idiot-child couldn't even pronounce the word correctly.

"Yes," the goat-boy said, "and he's supposed to hang there till the birds fluck out his eyes and the dogs eat out his end tails."

"Entrails."

"End tails!"

"All right, have it your way. End tails."

"I want you to leave him up there."

During this brief exchange, Eppstadt's gaze had been drawn to the goat-boy's

left foot. The nail of his middle toe had not been clipped (he guessed) since birth.

Now it looked more like a claw than a nail. It was six, perhaps seven, inches long,

and stained dark brown.

"Who the hell are you talking to?" Joe yelled down from the top of the ladder. The density of the foliage made it impossible for him to see the goat-boy.

"Apparently he's up there as a punishment, Joe. Better leave him there."

"Who told you that?"

Joe came down the ladder far enough to have sight of the goat-boy.
"That?"

The boy bared his teeth at Joe. A dribble of dark saliva came from the corner of his mouth and ran down onto his chest.

"I really think we should just get going..." Eppstadt said.

"Not until this poor sonofabitch is down from here," Joe said, returning up

the ladder. "Fucking freak."

"This isn't our business, Joe," Eppstadt said. There was something about the

way the air was rolling around them; something about the way the

clouds churned

overhead, covering the already depleted light of the sun, that made Eppstadt fearful

that something of real consequence was in the offing. He didn't know what this place

was, or how it was created; nor, at that moment, did he care. He just wanted to be

out through the door and upstairs again.

"Help me!" Joe yelled to him.

Eppstadt went to the bottom of the ladder and peered up. The crucified man

had dropped forward over Joe's broad shoulder. Even in his semi-comatose state he

could still beg for some show of compassion. "Please..." he murmured. I meant no

offense..."

"He wouldn't fuck my mother," said the goat-boy, by way of explanation for

this atrocity. He was just a foot or two behind Eppstadt, staring up at Joe and the

man he was attempting to save. He turned briefly; surveyed the sky. The wind was

getting gusty again, slamming the door and then throwing it open.

"She's coming," the goat-boy said. "Smell that bitterness in the air?"

Eppstadt could indeed smell something; strong enough to make his eyes water.

"That's her," the goat-boy said. "That's Lil-ith. She's bitter like that.

Even her milk." He made an ugly face. "It used to make me puke. And me? I love to

suckle. I love it." He was getting hard again, talking himself into a fine little

fever. He put his thumb in his mouth, and pulled hard on it, making a loud noise as

he did so. He was every inch an irritating little child, excepting those inches

where he was indisputably a man.

"I'd put him back if I were you," he said, pushing past Eppstadt to stand at

the bottom of the ladder.

Eppstadt's gaze returned to the heavens. The sky was the colour of cold

iron, and the bitterness the child had said was his mother's stench was getting

stronger with every gust of the cold wind. Eppstadt looked off into the distance, to

see if there was any sign of an arrivee on the winding road. But they were almost

deserted. The only person on any of the roads right now was a man some two or three

miles away, who was lying sprawled, his head against a stone. Eppstadt had no

logical reason to believe this, but he was somehow certain the man was dead, his

brains spattered on the stone where he lay his head.

Otherwise, the landscape was empty of human occupants.

There were plenty of birds in the air, struggling against the increasingly

violent gusts to reach the safety of their roosts; and small animals, rabbits and

the like, scampering through the roiling grass to find some place of safety.

Eppstadt was no nature-boy, but he knew enough to be certain that when rabbits were

making for their bolt-holes, it was time for human beings to get out of harm's way.

"We've got to go," he said to Joe. "You've done all you can."

"Not yet!" Joe yelled. The wind was strong enough to make even the heavy

branches of the tree sway. Dead leaves were shaken down all around.

Page 204

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"For God's sake, Joe. What the fuck is wrong with you?"

He took a step up the ladder and caught hold of Joe's belt. Then he tugged.

"You're coming, or I'm going without you."

"Then go-" Joe began to say. He didn't finish because at that instant the

ladder, which was presently bearing the weight of Eppstadt, Joe the Samaritan, and

the crucified man, broke.

Eppstadt was closest to the ground, so he sustained the least damage. He

simply fell back in the sharp stones in which the copse and its briar
thicket were

rooted. He scrambled to his feet to find out what had happened to the
other two men.

Both had fallen amongst the thorns, the crucified man spread-eagled
on top of Joe.

Only now were the man's wounds fully displayed. Besides the peckings
around his

eyes, there were far deeper wounds-certainly not made by birds-in his
chest.

Somebody had had some fun with him before he was nailed up there,
cutting

star-patterns around his nipples.

Joe struggled to get himself out from under the man, but his flailing
only

served to catch him in the thorns.

"Help me," he said, throwing his hand back over his head towards
Eppstadt.

"Quickly. I'm being pricked to death here!"

Eppstadt approached the thicket and was about to take hold of Joe's
hand

when two of the largest wounds on the crucified man's chest gaped,
and the flat

black heads of two snakes, each ten times the size of the serpent that
had slipped

out of his throat, pressed their blood-soaked snouts out of the layers of
flesh and

yellow fat, and came slithering out of his torso. One of them trailed a

multitude of

what Eppstadt took to be eggs, suspended in a jellied mass of semi-translucent

phlegm.

Eppstadt stepped away from the thicket, and from Joe. The serpents crisscrossed as they emerged, their beady white eyes seeking out some new warm place

to nest.

"Are you going to help me or not?" Joe said.

Eppstadt simply shook his head.

"Eppstadt!" Joe wept. "For God's sake get me out."

Eppstadt had no intention of getting any closer to the snakes than he already was: but the goat-boy had no such scruples. He pushed past Eppstadt and

grabbed hold of Joe's outstretched hand. His strength, like his member, was out of

all proportion to his size. One good haul, and he had Joe halfway freed from the

thorn bushes. Joe screamed as his back was scored by the thorns, which had been

pressed deep into his flesh by the weight of the man on top of him.

"Ah now, shut up!" the goat-boy yelled over Joe's complaints. Hanging out of

the thicket, poor Joe looked half-dead. The pain had made him vomit, and it was

running from the side of his mouth. His demands had become pitiful

sobs in the space

of a few seconds. Horrified though he was-and guilty too (he'd come down here to

help Joe; and now look at him)-Eppstadt still couldn't bring himself to intervene.

Not with the snakes raising their heads from the body in which they'd nested, still

eager for another victim.

Ignoring Joe's weak protests, the goat-boy pulled on him a second time, and

then a third, which was the charm. Joe fell free of the thicket, landing heavily on

his pierced back. Sheer agony lent him the strength to throw himself over onto his

stomach. His back was nearly naked; the violence of the goat-boy's haulings had torn

open his shirt. He lay face down in the dirt, retching again.

"That'll teach you," the goat-boy said. "Playing with criminals! You should

get some of your own!"

While he was addressing Joe in this witless fashion, Eppstadt chanced to

look up at the man still sprawled on the bed of thorns. The two snakes had slithered

over his chest and were now entwined around his neck. He was too close to death to

even register this last assault. He simply lay there, eyelids fluttering over

sightless eyes, while the life was throttled out of him.

"See that?" the goat-boy said. "So much for you and your tricks. Now I lost

my toy and your little friend is dead. Why couldn't you stay out of it, huh? He was

mine!" The boy's fury had him jumping up and down now. "Mine! Mine! Mine!"

And suddenly he was up on Joe's back, dancing a tarantella on the mess of

thorns and wounds and blood. "Mine! Mine! Mine!"

It was a show of petulance; no more nor less. Joe rolled over and threw the

boy off. Then he started to get to his feet. But before he could do so, the goat-boy

came at him, his step still reminiscent of some peculiar little dance.

Page 205

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"Get up!" Eppstadt yelled to Joe, not certain what the goat-boy was up to,

but certain it was mischief. "Quickly!"

Despite his agonized state, Joe started to push himself off his knees. As he

did so the goat-boy made a high slashing kick. Joe's hand went up to his neck, and

he fell back in the dirt.

The foot which had struck Joe was the one with the long middle nail, and

what had looked to Eppstadt like a glancing blow had in fact slashed open Joe's

windpipe.

Both Joe's hands were at his neck now, as blood and air escaped his throat.

He turned his gaze towards Eppstadt for a moment, as though the Head of Paramount

might know why Joe was lying in the dirt of a place he couldn't even name while his

last breath whined out between his fingers.

Then the look of incomprehension went out of his eyes, to be replaced with a

blank stare. His hands dropped away from his neck. The whining sound died away, and

he rolled forward. All the while the goat-boy went on dancing, out of pure pleasure.

Eppstadt didn't move. He was afraid to draw the murderer's attention. But

then the boy seemed to take it into his half-witted head to go find some other

plaything, and without looking back at Eppstadt again, he ran off, leaving Joe dead

in the dirt and the man who'd come to save him alone in the darkening air.

SIX

Tammy had come into the house cautiously, not at all certain what she was

going to find. In fact what she found was Jerry Brahms. He was

standing in the

hallway, looking down the stairwell, his face ashen-except where it was bloody from

his fall-his hands trembling. Before he could get a word out of his mouth there came

a din of shrieks from below.

"Who's down there?" Tammy asked Jerry.

"Some boy we came up here with from Maxine's party. A waiter. And Eppstadt.

And God knows what else."

"Where's Maxine?

"She's outside. She fled into the backyard when the earthquake hit."

There were more noises from below, and then a rush of wind, coming up the

stairwell. Tammy peered down into the darkness. There was somebody down at the very

bottom, lying on the floor. She studied the figure. It moved.

"Wait a minute," she said, half to herself, "That's Zeffer!"

It was. It was Zeffer. And he was alive. There was blood all over him, but

he was definitely alive. She went to the top of the stairs. He'd heard her calling

his name, and his shining eyes had found her; were fixed on her. She started down

the stairs."

"I wouldn't go down there..." Brahms warned her.

"I know," she replied. "But that's a friend of mine."

She glanced up at Brahms as she took her second step. There was a look of

mild astonishment on his face, she wasn't sure why. Was it because people didn't

have friends in this God-forsaken house; or because she was going down the stairs

despite the cold, dead smell on the wind?

Zeffer was doing his best to push himself up off his stomach, but he didn't

have the strength to do it.

"Wait," she called to him, "I'm coming."

She picked up her speed to get to him. Once she reached the bottom she tried

not to look towards the door through which he'd crawled, but she could feel the wind

gusting through it. There was a spatter of rain in that wind. It pricked her face.

"Listen to me..." Zeffer murmured.

She knelt beside him. "Wait. Let me turn you over."

She did her best to roll him over, so he wouldn't be face to the ground and

managed to lift him so that his head was on her lap, though his lower body was still

half-twisted around. He didn't seem to notice. He seemed, in fact, to be beyond

comfort or discomfort; in a dreamy state which was surely the prelude

to death. It

was astonishing that he'd survived this long, given the wounding he'd sustained. But

then perhaps he had the power of the Devil's Country to thank for that.

"Now," she said. "What do you want to tell me?"

"The horsemen," he said. "They're coming for the Devil's child..."

"Horsemen?"

"Yes. The Duke's men. Goga's men."

Page 206

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

Tammy listened. Zeffer was right. She could hear hooves on the wind, or in

the ground; or both. They sounded uncomfortably close.

"Can they get out?" she asked Zeffer.

"I don't know. Probably." His eyes closed lazily, and for a terrible moment

she feared she'd lost him. But they opened again, after a time, and his gaze fixed

on her. His hands reached up and took hold of Tammy's arm, though his grip was

feeble. "I think it's time the dead came in, don't you?" he said to her. His voice

was so softened by weakness she was not sure she'd heard it right at first.

"The dead?" she said.

He nodded. "Yes. All the ghosts, outside in the Canyon. They want to come

into the house, and we've kept them out all these years."

"Yes, but-"

He shook his head, as if to say: don't interrupt me, I don't have time.

"You have to let them in." he told her.

"But they're afraid of something," Tammy said.

"I know. The threshold. Remember how I told you I went back to Romania?"

"Of course."

"I found one of the Brotherhood there. A friend of Father Sandru's. He

taught me a method of keeping the dead from coming into your house. What you have to

do is undo what I did. And in they'll come. Believe me. In they'll come.

"How?" she said. If time was so short, and he was so certain, why waste a

breath on argument?

"Go into the kitchen and get a knife." He told her. "A strong knife, one

that's not going to break on you. Then go to the back door and dig in the

threshold."

"The threshold?"

"The wood frame you step over to go outside. There are five icons, in the

wood. Ancient Romanian symbols."

"And all I have to do is remove them?"

"You just remove them. The dead will be ready, as soon as the threshold is

clear. They've waited a very long time for this. Been very patient." He allowed

himself the smallest of smiles as he spoke; dearly the prospect of the dead invading

the house pleased him. "Will you do this for me, Tammy?"

"Of course. If that's what you want."

"It's what's right."

"Then I'll do it. Of course I'll do it."

"You only need open one door, they'll all find their way in. I suggest the

back door, because it's rotting. The threshold will be easier to..." He stopped, his

lips drawn back from his teeth in a grimace. The wound was taking its terrible toll.

Fresh blood came between his fingers.

"You don't need to tell me any more." She told him. "You just lie quietly.

I'll go get some help."

"No," he said.

"You need help."

"No," he said again, shaking his head. "Just get to work."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. This is more important."

"All right, I'll-"

She was about to repeat her reassurance when she realized he'd stopped

breathing. His eyes were still open, and there was still a lively gloss in them, but

no life there; nothing. William Zeffer's long and agonizing life was at an end.

On the floor above, Jerry looked up as the door to the master bedroom opened

and Todd emerged.

"Hello, Jerry," he said as he started down the stairs.

"You got hurt?"

"I fell during the quake."

"We need to get outside and find Maxine."

"Really?"

"She's lost out there. And Sawyer's dead. I'm afraid if somebody doesn't get

to her-"

"I heard the shouts," Jerry said vaguely, looking and sounding like a man

who'd lost all interest in the drama that was being played out around him.

"Who else is here?" Todd asked him.

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"Eppstadt's downstairs with some kid he brought from the party-"

"Yes, I saw him. Is he one of Maxine's new superstars?"

"No. He's just a waiter," Jerry said.

Todd looked down the rest of the flight. There was a body at the bottom of

the stairs, and somebody else, a woman, bent over, touching the face of the dead

man. With great gentility, she closed the dead man's eyes.

Then she looked up the stairwell.

"Hello, Todd," she said.

"Hello, Tammy."

"I thought you were drowned."

"Sorry to disappointment you." He started down the stairs towards her. She

turned her face from him, returning her gaze to the body.

"Did you see Eppstadt?" he asked her as he came down the flight.

"You mean that sonofabitch from the studio?"

"Yes. That sonofabitch."

"Yes, I saw him." She glanced up at Todd. There were tears in her eyes, but

she didn't want to shed them in front of him. Not after what had happened on the

beach. He'd been so horribly careless of her feelings. She wasn't going to show any

vulnerability now, if she could help it.

"Where did he go?" Todd asked her, as if there was much choice in the matter.

She nodded down the passageway towards the door to the Devil's Country.

"He went in there, I think. I didn't see it. Jerry told me."

"How long ago?"

"I don't know," she said. I And frankly, I don't really care right now." Todd

put his hand on Tammy's shoulder "I'm sorry. This is a bad time. I never was very

good expressing my feelings."

"Is that supposed to mean you're sorry?" she said.

"Yeah," he replied, the word hardly shaped; more like a grunt than an apology. She made the tiniest shrug of her shoulder, to get him to take his hand off

her, which he did. There was so much she wanted to say to him, but this was neither

the time nor the place to say it.

He got the message. She didn't have to look back to see that he'd gone; she

heard his footsteps as he headed off down the passageway. Only after ten or fifteen

seconds did she look up, and by that time he was stepping through the

door.

Suddenly, the tears she'd held back broke: a chaotic cluster of feelings battling to surface all at once: gratitude that Todd was alive, sorrow that Zeffer

was dead, anger that Todd had no better way to show his feelings than to grunt at

her that way. Didn't he know how much he'd hurt her?

"Here."

The voice at her shoulder was that of Jerry Brahms. He was offering her a

cleanly pressed handkerchief: a rather old-fashioned gesture but very much

appreciated at that particular moment. "Which one are you crying over?"

She wiped her tears from her eyes.

"Because if it's Todd," he went on, "I wouldn't bother. He'll survive this and go on and forget all of us. That's the kind of man he is."

"You think so?"

"I'm sure of it."

She wiped her nose. Sniffed.

"What was he talking to you about?" Jerry asked.

"He wanted to know about Eppstadt."

"Not Todd. Zeffer."

"Oh. He...he had something he wanted me to do for him."

She wasn't sure she wanted to share Zeffer's proposal with Jerry. This was a

world filled with people who had extremely complicated allegiances. Suppose Jerry,

out of some misplaced loyalty to Katya, tried to stop her? It was perfectly possible

that he might try. But then how the hell did she get rid of him, so that she could

go upstairs and do what she had to do?

One obvious way presented itself, although it was playing with fire. If she

went to the door of the Devil's Country, Jerry would probably follow her. The place

had a way of holding your attention, she knew. And if it held his for long enough,

then she could slip away upstairs into the kitchen. Find a knife. Go to the

threshold, and get to work.

It wasn't her favourite plan (the further she stayed away from that door the

Page 208

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

happier she was) but she had no alternative to hand at that moment. And she needed

to act quickly.

Without saying anything she got up and walked off down the passageway

towards the door. The wind came out to meet her, like an eager host, ready to slip

its arms through hers and invite her in. She didn't need to look over her shoulder

to know that Jerry was coming after her. He was talking to her, just a step behind.

"I don't think you should go any further," he said.

"Why not? I just want to see what's in here. Everybody talks about it. I think I'm the only one who hasn't actually seen it properly for myself."

As she spoke she realized that there was more truth to this than she was

strictly admitting. Of course she wanted to see. Her little plot to lure Jerry's

attention away was also a neat opportunity to excuse her own curiosity. Talk about

muddled allegiances. She had some of her own. One more glimpse into that other world

was on her own subconscious agenda, for some reason.

"It's not good to look in there for too long." Jerry said.

"I know that," she replied, a little testily. "I've been in there. But another peek can't hurt, can it? I mean, can it?"

She'd reached the door, and without further debate with Brahms, pushed it

open and stared at the landscape before her with eyes that had recently been washed

with tears. Everything was in perfect focus; and it was beautiful. She didn't

hesitate to debate the matter with her conscience, Brahms or God in Heaven. She just

stepped out of the passageway and followed where Todd had gone just a couple of

minutes before.

SEVEN

It wasn't difficult for Todd to find Eppstadt. Unlike his first visit to

this little corner of hell, when his eyes had taken some time to become used to the

elaborate fiction that the tiles were creating for him, this time everything was

warmed up and ready to go. He looked through the door and there it was, in all its

glory, from the spectacle of the eclipse overhead to a single serrated blade of

grass bent beneath the toe of his shoe, along which a little black beetle was making

its way.

And standing in the midst of all this, looking as appropriate as a hard-on

in the Vatican, was Eppstadt. He'd obviously had some problems while he was here.

The man who'd been several times cited as the 'best-dressed man in Los Angeles' was

looking in need of a tailor. His shirt was torn and severely stained with what

looked like blood, his face was covered in sweat, and his hair which he obsessively

combed over the bald patch (where the hair plugs hadn't taken)-had fallen forward,

exposing an area of shiny pink scalp, and giving him a ridiculous fringe.

"You!" he said, pointing directly at Todd, "You fucking lunatic! You did

this deliberately! And, now people are dead, Pickett. Real people. Dead because of

your stupid games."

"Hey, hey, slow down. Who's dead?"

"Oh, as if you give a damn! You trick us all into following you into this...this...obscenity..."

Todd looked around as Eppstadt ranted. Obscenity? He saw no obscenity. Given

the shortness of his acquaintance with this place he had certainly felt a lot of

different things about it. He'd been enchanted here, he'd been so terrified that

he'd thought his heart would burst, he'd been absurdly aroused and close to death as

he ever wanted to get. But obscene? No. The Devil's Country was simply the ultimate

E-Ticket Ride.

"If you don't like it," he said to Eppstadt, "why the hell did you come in

here?"

"To help Joe. And now he's dead."

"What happened to him?"

Eppstadt glanced over his shoulder, dropping his voice to a whisper.

"There's a child around here. Only it's not a child. He's a goat."

"So he's the Devil's kid?"

"Don't start with that Devil shit. I never made one of those movies--"

"This isn't a movie, Eppstadt."

"No, you're quite right. It isn't a movie. It's a fucking--"

"Obscenity. Yeah, so you said."

"How can you be so casual?" Eppstadt said, taking a stride towards Todd. "I

Page 209

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

just saw somebody sliced to death."

"What?"

"The goat-boy did it. Just opened up Joe's throat. And it's your fault."

Eppstadt's stride had picked up speed. He was getting ready to do something

stupid, Todd sensed; his terror had become a capacity for violence. And even though

there'd been times (that lunch, that long-ago lunch, over rare tuna) when Todd had

wanted to beat the crap out of Eppstadt, this was neither the time nor the place.

"You want to see what you caused?" Eppstadt said.

"Not particularly."

"Well you're going to."

He caught hold of the front of Todd's T-shirt.

"Let go of me, Eppstadt."

Eppstadt ignored him. He just turned and hauled Todd after him, the volatile

mixture of his fear and rage making him impossible to resist. Todd didn't even try.

Katya had given him a lesson in how to behave here. You kept quiet, or you drew

attention to yourself. And somehow-it was something about the way the wind seemed to

be blowing from all quarters at once, something about the way the grass seethed at

his feet and the trees churned like thunderheads-he thought it wasn't just Eppstadt

who was in a state of agitation. This whole painted world was stirred up.

By now the hunters' dogs probably had their scent, and the Duke was on his

way.

"Just chill," Todd said to Eppstadt. "I'm not going to fight you. If you

want me to see something then I'll come look. Just stop pulling on me, will you?"

Eppstadt let him go. His lower lip was quivering, as though he was about to

burst into tears, which for Todd's money was worth the price of

admission.

"You follow me," Eppstadt said, "I'll show you something."

"Keep your voice down. There are people around here you don't want to have

coming after you."

"I met one of them already," Eppstadt said, walking on towards a small group

of trees. "And I never want to see anything like it again."

"So let's get out of here."

"No. I want you to see. I want you to take full responsibility for what happened here."

"I didn't make this place," Todd said.

"But you knew it was here. You and your little lover. I'm putting the picture together now. Don't worry. I've got it all."

"Somehow I doubt that."

Eppstadt was searching the ground now, his step more cautious, as though he

was afraid of treading on something.

"What are you looking for?"

He glanced back at Todd. "Joe," he said. And then, returning his gaze to the

ground, he pointed. "There," he said.

"What?"

"There. Go look. Go on."

"Who was he?" Todd said, staring down at the maimed body in the dirt, its

throat gaping.

"His name was Joe Something-or-Other, and he was a waiter at Maxine's party.

That's all I know."

"And goat-kid did this to him?"

"Yeah."

"Why, for Christ's sake?"

"Amusement would be my closest guess."

Todd passed a clammy hand over his face. "Okay. I've see him now. Can we get

the hell out of here and find Maxine?"

"Maxine?"

"Yeah. She went outside with Sawyer-"

"I know."

"And now Sawyer's dead."

"Christ. We're being picked off like flies. Who killed him?"

"Some...animal. Only it wasn't any kind of animal I ever saw before."

"All right, I'm coming," Eppstadt said. "But you listen to me, Pickett. If we survive this, you've got a fuck of a lot to answer for."

"Oh, like you don't."

"Me? What the hell do I have to do with this?"

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"I'll tell you."

"I'm listening."

"I wouldn't be here and nor would you or Maxine or any other poor fuck-" He

glanced at Joe's corpse. "If you hadn't sounded off at the beach. Or-if you really

want to go back to the start of things-how about a certain conversation we had,

during which you suggested I get my face fixed?"

"Oh, that."

"Yes that."

"I was wrong. You should never have done it. It was a bad call."

"That was life. My flesh and-" He froze, for something had emerged from the

undergrowth: a beast that was a vague relative of a lizard, but shorter, squatter,

its back end having, instead of a long and serpentine tail, an outgrowth of two or

three hundred pale, bulbous tumors. It went directly to the remains of Joe.

"No, no, no," Eppstadt said quietly. Then suddenly, running at the creature

the way he might at a dog who'd come sniffing at his gate. "Get away!" he yelled.

"For God's sake, get away!"

The lizard threw the yellow-blue gaze of one of its eyes up in Eppstadt's

direction, was unimpressed, and returned to sniffing around the sliced-open neck. It

flicked the wound with its tongue.

"Oh Jesus. Oh Jesus," Eppstadt gasped.

He picked up a rock and threw it at the animal, striking its leathery hide.

Again, the cold, reptilian assessment, and this time the creature opened its throat

and let out a threatening hiss.

Todd caught hold of Eppstadt, wrapping his arms around him from behind, to

keep him from getting any more belligerent with the animal. They were lucky the

beast was so interested in the remains of Joe, he knew; otherwise it would have

turned on them.

The lizard averted its gaze from Eppstadt again, and started to tear at the

raw meat around Joe's neck so that Joe's head was thrown back and forth as it

secured itself a mouthful.

Eppstadt was no longer attempting to free himself from Todd's bear-hug, so

Todd let his hold slip a little, at which point he turned on Todd,

slamming the heel

of his hand against Todd's shoulder.

"That should have been you!" Eppstadt said, following the first blow with a

second, twice as strong.

Todd let him rant. Over Eppstadt's shoulder he saw the lizard retreating

into the undergrowth from which it had emerged, dragging the remains of Waiter Joe

after him.

"You hear me, Pickett?"

"Yeah, I hear you," Todd said wearily.

"That's all you're good for: lizard food. Lizard! Food!" The blows were coming faster and harder now. It was only a matter of time before Todd hit him back,

and they both knew it. Knew it and wanted it. No more innuendo; no more lawyers;

just fisticuffs in the mud.

"All right," Todd said, bitch-slapping Eppstadt for the fun of it. "I get it." He struck him again, harder. "You want to fight?" A third blow, harder still,

which split Eppstadt's lip. Blood ran from his mouth.

And then suddenly the two of them were at it, not exchanging clean neat

blows the way they did in the movies but knotted up together in a jumble of gouges

and kicks; years of anger and competition emptying in few chaotic seconds. They

could not have chosen a less perfect place or time to settle a personal score if

they'd looked a lifetime, but this wasn't about making sensible decisions. This was

about bringing the other sonofabitch down. As it was they both went down, having

wrestled their way into muddy terrain. Their feet slid from under them and down they

went, locked together, like two boys.

Tammy saw them fall.

"Oh no," she said, half to herself. "Not here. Don't do it here."

"I wouldn't go any closer if I were you," Brahms advised her.

"Well you're not me," Tammy said, and without waiting for any further response she pressed on over the uneven ground towards the two men in the mud. There

were sounds of birds overhead, and she glanced up at the sky as she walked towards

the men. It was spectacularly beautiful, and for a moment her thoughts were entirely

claimed by the piled cumulus and the partially-blinded sun. The darkness of the

Page 211

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

heavens between the clouds was profound enough that the brightest of the stars could

be seen, set in velvet grey.

When she looked back at Todd and Eppstadt, they were virtually

indistinguishable from one another physically-both liberally coated in mud. But it

was still dear which one was Eppstadt. He was letting out a virtually seamless

monologue about Todd. The general sense of which was that Todd was a vapid,

over-paid, talentless sonofabitch. Furthermore, when all this insanity was over he,

Eppstadt, was going to make certain that everybody knew that Todd had caused the

death of a number of innocent people with his arrogance.

As Tammy got closer to the fight it became evident to Tammy that this wasn't

going to end quickly or easily. Neither man was going to be talked down from their

fury; it had escalated too far. She could only hope they exhausted each other

quickly, before they attracted unwanted attention.

There seemed little hope of that. Though they'd fought to their feet again,

it was becoming harder and harder for either man to land a solid blow in this

slippery environment. Finally Eppstadt swung wide and went down in the mud, falling

heavily He struggled to get up, the heels of his hands sliding in the mud, but

before he could succeed, Todd clambered on top of him, and straddled him, his hands

at the man's throat. There was no fight left in Eppstadt. All he could do was gasp

and shake his head.

"You fuckhead," Todd said. "None of this would have happened...if you...had

made my fucking movie."

Eppstadt had by now recovered enough energy to speak. "I wouldn't put you in

a movie if my fucking life depended on it."

At which point, Tammy made her presence known. "Todd?"

It was Eppstadt who looked up first. "Oh Jesus," he said. "I wondered when

you were going to show your fat ass."

Tammy wasn't in the mood for long speeches. "Leave the shithead in the mud,

Todd," she said, "and let's just get out of here."

Todd grinned through his mask of mud; the megawatt smile. "It would be my

pleasure."

He got to his feet and stepped away. Eppstadt pulled his rather ungainly

bulk to his knees. He had lost one of his choice Italian shoes in the melee, and now

began to search for it. In fact, it had been flung wide of mud, close to where Tammy

was standing.

"Looking for this?" she said.

"Yes," he glared, beckoning with his fingers.

She tossed it in the thorn bushes.

"Cunt."

"Faggot."

"No. I am many things but a bugger I am not. Right, Brahms?"

"Don't bring me into this." Jerry said. "I just want us all out of here."

"We're coming, Jerry!" Todd said, not looking at him. "You go on and

take

Tammy."

"Not without you."

"Oh, how touching," Eppstadt said. "The fat girl is loyal to the end, even

though she doesn't have a hope in hell of getting a fuck out of it."

Tammy had kept her fury limited to that one casual toss of the Italian shoe,

but now it erupted; all her fury towards Eppstadts and his kind. The

Mr.-High-and-Mighty's who thought that fat fan-girls were less than shit.

"You are such scum!" she said. "You nasty-minded tiny-peckered little piece

of excrement!"

She approached him as she yelled, but after the fight with Todd the last

thing Eppstadt wanted was this woman laying her hands on him.

"Keep her away from me, Jerry," he demanded, raising his hands, palms out.

As he did so he retreated towards the copse of trees. "Jerry? You hear me?"

"Leave him, Tammy."

"Well, he's scum."

"And tell her to cover herself up," Eppstadt fired back. "The sight of her

cellulite makes me gag."

Jerry had caught hold of Tammy's arm.

Luckily for him, Tammy had suddenly lost interest in all this

score-settling. She was studying a group of horsemen who were following a winding

road that would eventually bring them, she quickly realized, to this very spot.

Page 212

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"Todd..." she said.

"Yes, I saw."

"We have visitors."

The Duke of Goga, of course, along with his entourage.

They still had plenty of time to get to the door, Tammy reckoned. The hunters were still some distance away, and it didn't seem that they'd yet spotted

the interlopers. Jerry was already on his way to the exit. Todd had found some clean

water to wash his wounds but he could be up and gone in a couple of seconds.

Eppstadt was the exception. He'd gone into the thorn-thicket to fetch his

Italian shoe, and as he did so, something moved in amongst the mass of thorny

branches off to the left of him.

He stopped reaching for his shoe, and studied the shadows. Whatever it was

seemed to have become snagged in there, because it shook itself. Then it let out a

kind of mewling sound and shook itself again, this time more violently. The maneuver

worked however. Freed of the thicket it stumbled out into view. It was the goat-boy.

He started to pull thorns out of his flesh, the pain of it making him weep, softly,

to himself.

Eppstadt knew what this creature was capable of from his previous encounter

and he had no desire to draw the attention of the beast. He gave up on his shoe and

set his eyes on the door. Jerry Brahms was right: it was time they got the hell out

of here.

The goat-boy had stopped weeping now, and for some reason had fixed his gaze

upon Tammy. Or more particularly, upon her breasts. There was no equivocation in his

stare; no attempt to pretend he was looking elsewhere. He simply stared lovingly at

the upper part of Tammy's torso, and licked his lips.

Tammy had heard the boy's sobbing complaints, and was staring at him. So was

Todd.

"Come on, Tammy." Todd said.

Tammy let her gaze go from the boy to the approaching hunters.
Plainly

they'd also heard the sound of the child's wails because they'd picked
up their

speed and were approaching at a hard gallop.

Tammy looked back at Lucifer's child, in all his goaty glory. His tears
had

dried now, and was less interested in picking thorns out of his flesh.
They'd done

some damage, she saw; little rivulets of dark red blood ran down his
limbs from the

places where he'd been pierced. There was one spot that looked
particularly tender,

deep in the groove of his groin. He worked the thorn out a little, but
not once did

he take his eyes off the objects of his present devotion. He didn't even
glance over

at the horsemen, though he must have heard their approach. He
obviously knew how to

out-manuever them. He'd been doing it for centuries. He had a warren
of hidey-holes

to tuck himself away.

Tammy glanced up at the sky: at the moon locked in its unnatural
position in

front of the sun. Then she looked around at the landscape which that
half-clouded

light illuminated: the road and the approaching horsemen, the cluster
of boulders

where Todd was standing, stripped of his torn T-shirt, doing his best to lift

handfuls of clean water up to his wounded face.

The goat-boy would be gone in a moment, Tammy knew. And when it was gone the

Hunt would, as Zeffer had told her, continue in the same weary way it had been going

for centuries.

Perhaps it was time to bring the whole sorry thing to an end, once and for

all: to see if she, little Tammy Lauper from Sacramento, couldn't deliver the

Devil's child back into the hands of the Duke, who could then return him to its

mother, and bring an end to this long, weary chase.

She knew of only one, desperate method by which she might do this. She

didn't waste time enacting it. She unbuttoned her torn blouse, starting at the top.

She had every jot of the goat-boy's attention from the moment her fingers touched

the first button. He forgot about removing thorns from his flesh. He simply watched.

"Like them?" she said to him so softly she was certain nobody would hear.

The goat-boy heard her, as she knew he would. He had an animal's ears.

By way of reply he nodded; very slowly, indeed almost reverentially.

There were two buttons remaining. Two buttons, and her blouse would fall

open, and he'd have a feast of her, hanging in front of his eyes. She stopped

unbuttoning. He made a little growl in his throat. The smile suddenly went from his

face. Perhaps she was imagining it, but there seemed to be a flicker of fire in his

eyes.

Page 213

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

She stopped her teasing and put her hands back up to the first of the remaining buttons. He rewarded her with a little smile, which showed her a detail

she'd missed until now. His teeth, though small, were all sharpened to a fine point.

He had the smile of a piranha. She literally felt the flesh around her nipple

tighten up at the prospect of those needles coming anywhere near her.

She chanced a quick look in the direction of the horsemen, but they had

disappeared from sight for a time. The road that was bringing them here had wound

into an expanse of pine forest. She looked back at the goat-boy. He was tapping his

left foot, which appendage boasted a nail that would not have shamed a raptor.

Plainly he was just a little anxious about the proximity of the Duke and his men: he

did not wish to be caught. But just as plainly he was not going to leave. Not yet;

not until he'd seen what Tammy had to offer.

He pointed at her. Made a little waggling motion with his forefinger. "Show

me," he said.

She smiled at him, but she didn't move to oblige.

"Show," he said again.

She continued to smile at him, all the while assessing how many strides of

his flat little feet it would take for him to reach her, should he take it into his

head to run. He could be on her in five strides, she guessed. Four if he pushed it.

She slipped one of the two buttons out of its hole. The blouse fell open a

little, giving him a peek at her left nipple. She flashed, suddenly, on some hot

summer's day in her fourteenth year, when she'd crept into her parents' room in the

middle of the afternoon, and played striptease in the mirror. She had more to boast

about than any of the other girls in her class. Bigger breasts, and hair down

between her legs. Her life would have been a lot happier if her breasts had stopped

growing that day. But they'd had a long way to go. By the time she was fifteen she

was like a young Shelley Winters; and it just got worse from there.

Strange how things came round. How something that had become a source of

shame for her was now, out of nowhere, redeemed. She let her fingers slip down to

the last button, knowing that the goat-boy's gaze would go with them, and she would

have a chance, however slim, to look up past him and see whether the horsemen had

emerged from the forest.

The news was bad. There was no sign of the Duke and his men. Had they

perhaps taken a wrong turning in the forest? Surely not. Surely they knew this

entire territory, after so many years of riding it.

"Show me your tits," the goat-boy demanded.

As he spoke he lifted his left leg and struck a stone with his raptor claw.

A bright spark leapt from the place and landed on a tuft of grey grass, where it

erupted into a little fire. It had too little fuel to keep it sustained for long,

but in the five or six seconds that it took for the cycle of spark, fire and

extinction to play out Tammy heard the sound of the Duke's horses, and from the

corner of her eye saw them emerging from between the trees.

The goat-boy narrowed his eyes to golden slits. The corners of his mouth

turned down, showing the lower row of monstrous teeth.

"Show me," he said again.

Plainly he wasn't going to be toyed with any longer. He wanted to see what

she had, and he wanted to see them now.

She didn't pretend that the horsemen's proximity was not of interest to her.

What was the use? Everybody was in on this ridiculous game, the goat-boy included.

He dropped his head a little, which should have been a sign for Tammy as to what he

would do next, but she was too busy thinking about how long the Duke would take to

get off his horse to realize that the goat-boy was making make a run at her. And by

the time she did realize, he was already halfway there, and there was nothing

between her bare breasts and his hands, his mouth, his teeth, but a prayer.

EIGHT

Fearing the worst, Todd let out a yell, and started racing across the muddy,

bloody ground to do whatever he could to stop the goat-boy attacking Tammy. But

before he could get there she had taken matters into her own hands.
She let the last

of the six buttons slip, and her blouse fell open, unveiling her breasts.
The sight

of them literally stopped the Devil's child in his tracks. He opened his
mouth and

drool ran from it.

Tammy was smart enough not to reject this sign of adoration, however
crude.

Page 214

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

Instead, she opened her arms, inviting him into her embrace. Todd
would have betted

against the wisdom of this. The goat-boy was no sentimentalist. He
wanted to play

rough. But had he made that bet, he would have lost it.

The Devil's child fell to his knees, laughing. Then he crawled-yes,

crawled-into Tammy's arms. His hands went greedily up to one of her
breasts, and he

held the unwieldy bubble of flesh before his eyes for a moment of
devotion. His

mouth was slick and wet; the saliva glinted off his terrible teeth.

"Please God..." Todd murmured.

It was very possibly the strangest sensation of Tammy's thirty-four
years,

the feeling of the Devil's child's mouth around her left nipple. There
had been a

moment-as he closed his mouth around her-when it had crossed her mind that she

should be afraid; that with one chomp he could give her an instant mastectomy if he

so chose. But somehow she knew he would not. He was in love with her breasts.

Instead he worshipped them, in his way. Though his mouth was tight around her flesh,

she felt not so much as the lightest of scratches from those shark-like teeth. In

fact she suspected he'd somehow sheathed them, the way a snake sheathed its fangs,

because as he sucked and sucked all she felt was a slightly guilty rush of pleasure

as his suction drew the blood to the nipple, and the flesh surrounding the nipple,

sensitizing the entire area.

Then, as though all this weren't peaceful and domestic enough, the Devil's

child closed his eyes, his fat little hands holding the source of his bliss, and

Tammy gently rocked him in her arms.

Goga had been searching for Lilith's child for many centuries now, under a

sky that-though it was sometimes cloudy, sometimes clear-always showed the sun

eclipsed. He had no real idea of how long his imprisonment in the Devil's Country

had lasted; his mind had long ago lost any grasp on the passage of time. He and his

men had passed the centuries in a kind of fugue state. Sometimes, when they rested

and ate what they'd hunted-rabbit on occasion, or venison, or wild pig-they would

talk about what had happened to them that day on the hunt, and where they now were.

It was the Duke's opinion that this was not a real place at all, but a kind of dream

that the Devil was dreaming, and they were trapped in it. How else to explain the

curious limitations of their condition? The same ships forever heading towards the

horizon, the same roads haunted by the same beasts; the same sun in the same heaven,

half-blinded by the same black moon?

But in the last few days-if days and nights could truthfully be said to pass

here-there had been signs that things were changing in what had been hitherto a

virtually changeless place. There had always been strangers coming and going

(trapped, the philosophizing Duke surmised, in the same infernal dream they found

themselves in). But whereas in the past visitors had little or no effect upon the

world they were wandering through, the trespassers of recent times had not been

quite so guileless or so lucky. Several had perished in the region around the

forest.

And now-as if all this were not strange enough-a new spectacle, stranger by

some measure than all that had preceded it:

Sitting beside the road-nursing the object of their long search as though he

were a commonplace baby-was a bare-breasted woman.

The Duke dismounted a few yards from where Tammy sat in the dirt, rocking

the goat-boy in her arms. His lieutenants had dismounted several horse-lengths away,

and were now creeping around the nursing woman, swords drawn.

Tammy saw all of this, but she registered nothing-not a word, not the

raising of a finger-for fear of alerting the contented child to the fact that his

time in this idyllic state was about to end.

Very cautiously, the Duke approached the woman and child, beckoning to his

men to take their final positions. One of the men had brought a wooden box; clearly

his own crude handiwork which he now opened and positioned behind the pair.

The goat-boy didn't open his eyes, but he pulled his mouth away from Tammy's

breast long enough to say: "You don't all have to creep around like

that. I know

what you're up to." He'd no sooner spoken than his interest in the Duke's men was

forgotten again and he was back to stroking the ample flesh in front of him.

"Beautiful," he said to Tammy. "Do you have names for your tits?"

"Names?" Tammy said. "Actually, no."

Page 215

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"Oh you should. They're amazing." He kissed them, first left, then right,

then left again, tender, affectionate kisses: "May I name them myself?" He asked

this question with the greatest delicacy, stumbling over the words. Plainly the last

thing he would have wished to do is cause offense.

"Of course." she said.

"I may? Oh thank you. Then this must be Helena, who I sucked on, and this

one I'll call Beatrice." He looked at Tammy, framed by her breasts. "And you? Who

are you?"

"Tammy."

"Just Tammy?"

"Tammy Jayne Lauper."

"I'm Qwaftzefoni," the goat-boy said. "Are you on the run from somebody,

Tammy?"

"I was, I suppose, in a way."

"Who?"

"My husband Arnie."

"He doesn't appreciate you?"

"No."

The goat-boy began to lick Helena and Beatrice, again big sloppy
tonguings

that made Tammy shudder with pleasure.

"No children?" he said in the middle of a stroke.

"No. Arnie can't..."

"But you could, Tammy." He lay his head against her pillows. "Believe
me, I

know about these things. You're fertile as the Nile. As soon as you get
pregnant

these beautiful mammaries will become milk-machines. And your
children will be

strong and healthy, with strong, healthy hearts, like you." Finally, he
opened his

eyes just a slit, his gaze first settling on her face then slipping
sideways, to get

a glimpse of the cage. "So what's your opinion?" he said to her.

"About what?"

"Should I give myself up, or let the chase go on?"

"What happens if you give yourself up?"

"I go home. With my mother, Lilith. Back to Hell."

"Isn't that where you should be?"

"Yes, I suppose so. But how would you feel if I said you should be back with

Arnie?"

"Oh no..."

"So, you understand," he said, running an appreciative palm over the smooth

globes, then putting his head down between them, his chin in the groove. "Sometimes

you just have to get away, at least for a while. But you know, now that I lie here,

I think, maybe it's time to give up. I've been running for years. Never let anybody

lay a finger on me. Until you." His voice, already low, went to a barely audible

whisper, almost a hiss. "Are they very close now?" he said.

"Yes," she told him. "They're very close."

He toyed with her hardened nipple. "If I give myself up, what will happen?"

"I think we'll all leave this country, one way or another."

"And...in your opinion...would that be such a bad idea?"

"No," she told him. "In my opinion it would be a very good idea."

"And they won't hurt me?"

"They won't hurt you."

"You promise?"

She looked into his eyes, brown into gold. "I promise they won't hurt you."

"All right," he said, lifting his arms up and putting them round her neck.

"It's time we put an end to this. But first you have to kiss me."

"According to who?"

"According to me."

She kissed his grizzled lips. And as she did so, he leapt out of her arms,

as though he'd been slick with butter; a jump that carried him three or four feet

above her head.

"Prindeti-l!" the Duke yelled.

His men weren't about to come so close to their quarry and lose him again.

They each caught hold of an arm and leg of the child, and carried him, squealing

more like a pig than a goat, to the wooden crate.

Before they could get him safely locked away, however, there came a shout

from Eppstadt. "Where are you going with that thing?" he demanded.

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"They're taking it away," Todd explained.

"Oh, no they're not. Absolutely not. I saw it commit murder. I want to see

it tried in a court of law."

He started towards the two men who had taken hold of the creature. The Duke,

sword drawn, instantly came to stand between them.

Tammy, meanwhile, even before she'd buttoned herself up, was ready to add

her own voice to the argument. "Don't you interfere," she told

Eppstadt. "You'll fuck up everything."

"Are you crazy? Well, yes, why am I asking? Of course you're crazy. Letting

that thing suck on you that way. You obscene woman."

"Just do it!" Todd urged the men, hoping his miming of the boy's

imprisonment would help the men understand his meaning.

It did. While the Duke held Eppstadt at swordpoint, his men put the goat-boy

into the crate, the wooden bars of which were decorated with small iron icons,

hammered into the timber. Whatever their meaning, they did the trick. Though

Qwaftzefoni was easily strong enough to shake the crate apart he did not so much as

lay his hands on the bars, but sat passively in his little prison,

awaiting the next

stage of the proceeding.

The Duke issued a new round of orders, and the men lifted the crate onto the

back of one of the horses, and started to secure it there.

While they did so the Duke made a short, but apparently deeply sincere,

speech to Tammy, thanking her, she assumed, for her part in this dangerous

enterprise. All the while he kept an eye on Eppstadt, and his sword raised should

the man attempt to interfere. Eppstadt was obviously equally aware that the Duke

meant business, even if he didn't understand the exchange, because he kept his hands

raised throughout, and his mouth shut.

Todd, meanwhile, stood watching the sky. There was, it seemed, a subtle

change in the configuration of the heavens. The moon was very slowly moving off the

face of the sun.

Suddenly, there was a shriek from one of the Duke's men. The goat-boy had

found a place where his hand and arm could fit through the bars without touching the

icons, and using a moment of the man's distraction, had reached out and was digging

his short-fingered hand into the meat around the man's eye. He had firm hold of it;

firm enough to shake the man back and forth like a puppet. Blood gushed from the

place, splashing against the goat-boy's palm and running down his victim's face.

The horse on which the crate was set reared up in panic, and the crate-which

had not yet been firmly fixed to the saddle, slid off. The creature did not let go

of his victim. He hung onto the man's face as the crate crashed to the ground. It

did not break open, as no doubt the goat-boy had hoped; and in a fit of frustration

he started to tear the man's flesh open still further.

The Duke was swift. He came to the place in two strides and with a single

swing of his sword separated the goat-boy's hand from his wrist. The creature let

out a sickening, shrill wail.

Tammy-who'd watched all this in a state of horrified disbelief (how could

this cruel monster be the same childish thing she'd had sucking on her moments

ago?)-now covered her ears against the noise of both victims, man and boy. Though

she'd muted the scene she couldn't take her eyes off it: the hunter, dropping to his

knees with the child's hand still fixed in his face like some foul parasite; the

goat-boy in his crate, stanching his stump with his other hand; the Duke, wiping the

blood off his blade-

There was a short moment of calm as the goat-boy's sobs became subdued and

the wounded man, having pulled the hooked finger out of his flesh, covered his wound

with a cloth, to slow the flow of blood.

The calm lasted no more than twenty seconds. It was broken by a grinding

sound in the earth, as though a machine made of stone and iron was on the move down

there.

"What fresh hell is this?" Jerry murmured.

Tammy's eyes were on the crate, and its contents. The goat-boy had given up

all his complaints, and was peering between the bars with his mouth open and slack.

He knew exactly what was about to happen.

"Earthquake?" Eppstadt said.

"No," Tammy replied, reading the look on the goat-boy's face. "Liliih."

Page 217

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

PART NINE

THE QUEEN OF HELL

ONE

The ground opened up as though it was going to bring forth some fantastic

spring: red shoots, as fine as needles, appeared in their tens of thousands, pierced

the ground. A V-shaped crack, each side perhaps twenty feet in length, then erupted

into the burgeoning ground, the apex no more than a yard from the spot where had

goat-boy's crate sat.

The steady reverberation of immense machinery increased, and it now became

apparent what purpose this machine had, for an opening appeared in the earth,

resembling the upper part of some vast reptilian snout. The red needles continued to

grow, both in size and number, especially around the lip; and at a certain point,

when they were perhaps a foot tall, or taller, they produced hosts of tiny

purple-black flowers, which gave off a scent no one in the vicinity (except, of

course, Qwaftzefoni) was familiar with. It was pungent, like a spice, but there was

nothing about it which would ever have persuaded a cook to use it: the smell, and

thus presumably the taste, was so powerful that it would have

overwhelmed even the

most robust dish. It made everyone feel faintly nauseated by its forcefulness.

Eppstadt, who had the weakest stomach, actually threw up.

By the time he'd done with his retching the extraordinary growth-cycle of

the plant had carried it past its peak, however. The small black blossoms were in

sudden decay, their petals losing their colour. And now, in its autumnal mode, the

odor of the plant changed. What had been an almost unbearable stench a minute before

became transformed by the process of corruption, its foulness entirely evaporated.

What remained was a scent that somehow conspired with the souls of everyone

present to put them in mind of some sweet memory: something lost; something

sacrificed; something taken by time or circumstance. Nor, though their bodies were

held in the embrace of these feelings, could they have named them. The scent was too

subtle in its workings to be pinned to any one memory. All that mattered was the

state of utter vulnerability in which it left everyone. By the time the Hell's Mouth

had opened, and Lilith herself had stepped out of its long, sharp shadows, her flora

had enraptured the souls of everyone who stood before her. Whatever they saw from

now on, whatever they said and did, was colored by the way the scent of her strange

garden had touched them.

Was she beautiful? Well, perhaps. The scent was beautiful, so it seemed

she-who was shaped by the scent, as if her body were carved from perfumed smoke-was

surely beautiful too, though a more logical assessment might have pointed out how

curiously made her face was, close in colour and texture to the blossoms in their

corrupted phase.

Her voice, that same less dreamy assessor might have said, was unmusical,

and her dress, despite its great size and elaboration (tiny, incomprehensible motifs

hand-sewn in neat rows, millions of times) more proof of obsession, even of madness,

than of beauty.

Even allowing that there can be not one good and reliable report of Lilith,

the Devil's wife, some things may still be clearly said of her. She was happy, for

one. She laughed with almost indecent glee at the sight of her caged child, though

she plainly saw that he was missing a hand. And her manner, when

dealing with the

Duke, was nothing short of exquisite.

"You've suffered much for your crime against my household," she said,

speaking in cultured English, which-by some little miracle of her making-he

understood. "Do you have any idea how many years have passed since you first began

to hunt for that idiot child of mine?" She stabbed a finger at the creature in the

crate, who started to moan and complain, until she shushed him by slapping the bars.

The Duke replied that no, he did not know.

"Well, perhaps it's best you don't," Lilith told him. "But what you should

know, because it will shape what happens when I have taken this imp of mine back, is

that your natural life-span-your three score years and ten-was over centuries ago."

The Duke looked puzzled at this; and then aghast, as he realized the

consequences of what she was telling him: that he and his men had hidden their lives

away in this fruitless Hunt; around and around and around, chasing a baby who'd put

on perhaps two years in the period of the pursuit.

"My father?" he said. "My brother?"

"All dead," Lilith said, with some little show of sympathy. "All that you

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

knew and remembered has gone."

The Duke's face remained unchanged, but tears filled up his eyes and then

spilled down his cheeks.

"Men and your hunts," Lilith went on, addressing, it seemed, some larger

error in the Duke's sex. "If you hadn't been out killing healthy stags and boars in

the first place, you could have married and lived and loved. But," she shrugged, "we

do as our instincts dictate, yes? And yours brought you here. To the very edge of

your own grave."

She was telling him, it seemed, that he'd run out of life and now, after all

the sacrifices of his Hunt, his reward would be death: pure, simple and comfortless.

"Let me have my child then," she said. "Then we'll have this wretched business over and done with."

It was at this point that Eppstadt spoke up once more. He'd had a twitching

little smile on his face for a while, the reason for which was simple enough: this

latest spectacle (the earth opening up, the flowers, the scent that toyed with

memory) had finally convinced him that one of his earlier explanations for all of

this was most likely the correct one. He was lying unconscious somewhere in the

house (probably having been struck by a falling object during the earthquake) and

was fantasizing this whole absurd scene. He very seldom felt as self-willed in

dreams as he felt in this one; indeed, he seldom dreamed at all; or at least

remembered his dreams. But now that he had this nonsense in his grasp, he wasn't

ready to let it go just yet. Ever the negotiator, he stepped forward and put out his

hand, to prevent the Duke passing over the child.

"I don't suggest you do that just yet," he said, not sure whether the man

understood him or not, though the gesture was clear enough. "The moment you hand

over the brat, you're dead. You understand?"

"Don't do this, Eppstadt," Todd advised.

"Why the hell not? It's just a dream-"

"It's not a dream," Jerry said. "It's real. Everything down here is as-"

"Oh Christ, Brahms, shut up. You know what I'm going to do when I'm finished

sorting this out? I'm going to kick your faggot ass." He grinned, obviously hugely

satisfied to be so politically incorrect.

"You're going to regret this," Todd said. "Jerry's right."

"How can he be right?" Eppstadt said, his voice dripping contempt.

"Look at

this place! How can any of this fucking idiocy be real? It's all going on in my

head! And I bet you thought I had the dull little mind of a business school

executive!"

"Eppstadt," Todd said. "This is not going on in your mind."

Eppstadt made the donkey-bray buzz that accompanied the wrong answer on a

quiz show. He was riding high on his newfound, comprehension of his situation,

"Wrong, baby. Fuck! So very, very wrong. Can I say something, while we've got this

moment, and it's my dream so I'll fucking say it anyway? You are a terrible actor. I

mean, we would get the dailies in at Paramount and we would howl, I mean we would

fucking howl, at some of the takes. Tears pouring down our faces while you attempted

to emote."

"You are such a cunt."

"That I am. And you're a millionaire many times over because I persuaded a

bunch of losers who wouldn't know a crass commercial decision from

a hole in their

asses to pay you an obscene amount of money to parade your God-given attributes." He

turned to Lilith, who had been watching this outburst as though amused by the

cavorting of an antic dog. "Sorry. There I go mentioning the G-word. Probably

doesn't sit well with you?"

"God?" Lilith said. "No. God sits perfectly well with me."

Eppstadt was clearly about to make some boorish reply to this but Lilith

ignored him.

She let out a rhythmical whistle, and up from the dark throat of the earth

came two women, bald and bare-breasted. At the sight of either faces or breasts,

perhaps both, the goat-boy in the crate started to get voluble again, wailing and

chattering.

"This is the end, then." Lilith said to the Duke. "I'm taking him. Do you have any final words?"

The Duke shook his head, and raised his sword-jabbing it in Eppstadt's direction in order to persuade him to stay out of these proceedings. Eppstadt stood

his ground, until the point of the Duke's sword pierced his mud-caked shirt. Then he

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

yelped and duly stepped back to prevent worse coming his way.

"Hurt, did it?" Jerry said.

"Shut the fuck up," Eppstadt snapped.

He made no further attempt to agent the exchange between Lilith and the

Duke, however. The crate was unbolted, and Lilith reached in, grabbing her

one-handed offspring by his dick and balls.

"Take him, ladies," she said to the women, and in a most unmotherly fashion

she threw him into the arms of her maidservants, who seized him between them and

carried him off down the slope and into the darkness.

"So it finishes," Lilith said to the Duke.

She turned on her heel, catching hold of her insanely embroidered garment,

and lifting it up to clear her step. Then she glanced back. "Did you have children?"

she asked the Duke.

He shook his head.

"Then you'll lie with those who went before you but not with any that came

after. That's good. It would be mournful to meet your children in the grave

tonight." She inclined her head. "Farewell then, my lord. It seems to me; you've

earned your rest."

She had said all she intended to say, and again made to depart, The
Damnation Game by Clive Barker

Copyright 1985

Nor yet exempt, though ruling them like slaves,
From chance, and death, and mutability.

-SHELLY, Prometheus Unbound

Part One

TERRA INCOGNITA

Hell is the place of those who have denied;
They find there what they planted and what dug.
A Lake of Spaces, and a Wood of Nothing,
And wander there and drift, and never cease
Wailing for substance.

-W.B. YEATS, The Hour Glass

1

The air was electric the day the thief crossed the city, certain that
tonight, after
so many weeks of frustration, he would finally locate the card-player.
It was not an
easy journey. Eighty-five percent of Warsaw had been leveled, either
by the months

of mortar bombardment that had preceded the Russian liberation of the city, or by

the program of demolition the Nazis had undertaken before their retreat. Several

sectors were virtually impassable by vehicle. Mountains of rubble-still nurturing

the dead like bulbs ready to sprout as the spring weather warmed-clogged the

streets. Even in the more accessible districts the once-elegant facades swooned

dangerously, their foundations growling.

But after almost three months of plying his trade here, the thief had become

used to navigating this urban wilderness. Indeed, he took pleasure in its desolate

splendor: its perspectives tinged lilac by the dust that still settled from the

stratosphere, its squares and parkways so unnaturally silent; the sense he had,

trespassing here, that this was what the end of the world would be like. By day

there were even a few landmarks remaining-forlorn signposts that would be dismantled

in time-by which the traveler could chart his route. The gas works beside the

Poniatowski Bridge was still recognizable, as was the zoo on the other side of the

river; the clock-tower of Central Station showed its head, though the clock had long

since disappeared; these and a handful of other pockmarked tributes to Warsaw's

civic beauty survived, their trembling presence poignant, even to the thief.

This wasn't his home. He had no home, nor had for a decade. He was a nomad

and a scavenger, and for a short space Warsaw offered sufficient pickings to keep

him here. Soon, when he'd recovered energies depleted in his recent wanderings, it

would be time to move on. But while the first signs of spring murmured in the air he

lingered here, enjoying the freedom of the city.

Page 220

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

There were hazards certainly, but then where were there not for a man of his

profession? And the war years had polished his powers of self-preservation to such

brilliance that little intimidated him. He was safer here than the true citizens of

Warsaw, the few bewildered survivors of the holocaust who were gradually beginning

to filter back into the city, looking for lost homes, lost faces. They scrabbled in

the wreckage or stood on street corners listening to the dirge of the river, and

waited for the Russians to round them up in the name of Karl Marx.

New barricades

were being established every day. The military were slowly but systematically

reclaiming some order from the confusion, dividing and subdividing the city as they

would, in time, the entire country. The curfews and the checkpoints did little to

hobble the thief, however. In the lining of his well-cut coat he kept identification

papers of every kind-some forged, most stolen-one of which would be suitable for

whatever situation arose. What they lacked in credibility he made up for with

repartee and cigarettes, both of which he possessed in abundance. They were all a

man needed-in that city, in that year-to feel like the lord of creation.

And such creation! No need here for either appetite or curiosity to go

unsatisfied. The profoundest secrets of body and spirit were available to anyone

with the itch to see. Games were made of them. Only the previous week the thief had

heard tell of a young man who played the ancient game of cups and ball (now you see

it, now you don't) but substituted, with insanity's wit, three buckets and a baby's

head.

That was the least of it; the infant was dead, and the dead don't suffer.

There were, however, other pastimes available for hire in the city, delights that

used the living as their raw material. For those with the craving and the price of

entry, a traffic in human flesh had begun. The occupying army, no longer distracted

by battle, had discovered sex again, and there was profit in it. Half a loaf of

bread could purchase one of the refugee girls-many so young they scarcely had

breasts to knead-to be used and reused in the covering darkness, their complaints

unheard or silenced by a bayonet when they lost their charm. Such casual homicide

was overlooked in a city where tens of thousands had died. For a few weeks-between

one regime and the next-anything was possible: no act found culpable, no depravity

taboo.

A boys' brothel had been opened in the Zoliborz District. Here, in an

underground salon hung with salvaged paintings, one could choose from chicks of six

or seven up, all fetchingly slimmed by malnutrition and tight as any connoisseur

could wish. It was very popular with the officer class, but too expensive, the thief

had heard it muttered, for the noncommissioned ranks. Lenin's tenets of equal choice

for all did not stretch, it seemed, to pederasty.

Sport, of a kind, was more cheaply available. Dogfights were a particularly

popular attraction that season. Homeless curs, returning to the city to pick at the

meat of their masters, were trapped, fed to fighting strength and then pitted

against each other to the death. It was an appalling spectacle, but a love of

betting took the thief to the fights again and again. He'd made a tidy profit one

night by putting his money on a runty but cunning terrier who'd bested a dog three

times its size by chewing off its opponent's testicles.

And if, after a time, your taste for dogs or boys or women palled, there

were more esoteric entertainments available.

In a crude amphitheater dug from the debris of the Bastion of Holy Mary the

thief had seen an anonymous actor single-handedly perform Goethe's Faust, Parts One

and Two. Though the thief's German was far from perfect, the performance had made a

lasting impression. The story was familiar enough for him to follow the action-the

pact with Mephisto, the debates, the conjuring tricks, and then, as the promised

damnation approached, despair and terrors. Much of the argument

was indecipherable,

but the actor's possession by his twin roles-one moment Tempter, the next

Tempted-was so impressive the thief left with his belly churning.

Two days later he had gone back to see the play again, or at least to speak

to the actor. But there were to be no encores. The performer's enthusiasm for

Goethe had been interpreted as pro-Nazi propaganda; the thief found him hanging, joy

decayed, from a telegraph pole. He was naked. His bare feet had been eaten at and

his eyes taken out by birds; his torso was riddled with bullet holes. The sight

pacified the thief. He saw it as proof that the confused feelings the actor had

aroused were iniquitous; if this was the state to which his art had brought him the

man had clearly been a scoundrel and a sham. His mouth gaped, but the birds had

taken his tongue as well as his eyes. No loss.

Page 221

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

Besides, there were far more rewarding diversions. The women the thief could

take or leave, and the boys were not to his taste, but the gambling he loved, and

always had. So it was back to the dogfights to chance his fortunes on a mongrel. If

not there, then to some barrack-room dice game, or-in desperation-betting with a

bored sentry on the speed of a passing cloud. The method and the circumstance

scarcely concerned him: he cared only to gamble. Since his adolescence it had been

his one true vice; it was the indulgence he had become a thief to fund. Before the

war he'd played in casinos across Europe; chemin de fer was his game, though he was

not averse to roulette. Now he looked back at those years through the veil war had

drawn across them, and remembered the contests as he remembered dreams on waking: as

something irretrievable, and slipping further away with every breath.

That sense of loss changed, however, when he heard about the

cardplayer-Mamoulia, they called him-who, it was said, never lost a game, and who

came and went in this deceitful city like a creature who was not, perhaps, even

real.

But then, after Mamoulia, everything changed.

2

So much was rumor; and so much of that rumor not even rooted in truth. Simply lies

told by bored soldiers. The military mind, the thief had discovered,
was capable of

inventions more baroque than a poet's, and more lethal. So when he
heard tell of a

master cardsharp who appeared out of no where, and challenged
every would-be gambler

to a game and unfailingly won, he suspected the story to be just that:
a story. But

something about the way this apocryphal tale lingered confounded
expectation. It

didn't fade away to be replaced by some yet more ludicrous romance.
It appeared

repeatedly-in the conversation of the men at the dogfights; in gossip,
in graffiti.

What was more, though the names changed the salient facts were the
same from one

account to the next. The thief began to suspect there was truth in the
story after

all. Perhaps there was a brilliant gambler operating somewhere in the
city. Not

perfectly invulnerable, of course; no one was that. But the man, if he
existed, was

certainly something special. Talk of him was always conducted with a
caution that

was like reverence; soldiers who claimed to have seen him play spoke
of his

elegance, his almost hypnotic calm. When they talked of Mamoulia
they were peasants

speaking of nobility, and the thief-never one to concede the

superiority of any

man-added a zeal to unseat this king to his reasons for seeking the card-player out.

But beyond the general picture he garnered from the grapevine, there were

few specifics. He knew that he would have to find and interrogate a man who had

actually faced this paragon across a gaming table before he could really begin to

separate truth from speculation.

It took two weeks to find such a man. His name was Konstantin Vasiliev, a

second lieutenant, who, it was said, had lost everything he had playing against

Mamoulia. The Russian was broad as a bull; the thief felt dwarfed by him. But while

some big men nurture spirits expansive enough to fill their anatomies, Vasiliev

seemed almost empty. If he had ever possessed such virility, it was now gone. Left

in the husk was a frail and fidgety child.

It took an hour of coaxing, the best part of a bottle of black-market vodka

and half a pack of cigarettes to get Vasiliev to answer with more than a

monosyllable, but when the disclosures came they came gushingly, the confessions of

a man on the verge of total breakdown. There was self-pity in his talk,

and anger

too; but mostly there was the stench of dread. Vasiliev was a man in mortal terror.

The thief was mightily impressed: not by the tears or the desperation, but by the

fact that Mamoulia, this faceless card-player, had broken the giant sitting across

the floor from him. Under the guise of consolation and friendly advice he proceeded

to pump the Russian for every sliver of information he could provide, looking all

the time for some significant detail to make flesh and blood of the chimera he was

investigating.

"You say he wins without fail?"

"Always."

"So what's his method? How does he cheat?"

Vasiliev looked up from his contemplation of the bare boards of the floor.

"Cheat?" he said, incredulously. "He doesn't cheat. I've played cards all my

life, with the best and the worst. I've seen every trick a man can pull. And I tell

you now, he was clean."

"The luckiest player gets defeated once in a while. The laws of chance-"

A look of innocent amusement crossed Vasiliev's face, and for a moment the

thief glimpsed the man who'd occupied this fortress before his fall from sanity.

"The laws of chance are nothing to him. Don't you see? He isn't like you or

me. How could a man always win without having some power over the cards?"

"You believe that?"

Vasiliev shrugged, and slumped again. "To him," he said, almost

contemplative in his utter dismay, "winning is beauty. It is like life itself."

The vacant eyes returned to tracing the rough grain of the floorboards as

the thief somersaulted the words over in his head: "Winning is beauty. It is like

life itself." It was strange talk, and made him uneasy. Before he could work his way

into its meaning, however, Vasiliev was leaning closer to him, his breath fearful,

his vast hand catching hold of the thief's sleeve as he spoke.

"I've put in for a transfer, did they tell you that? I'll be away from here in a few

days, and nobody'll be any the wiser. I'm getting medals when I get home. That's why

they're transferring me: because I'm a hero, and heroes get what they ask for. Then

"I'll be gone, and he'll never find me."

"Why would he want to?"

The hand on the sleeve fisted; Vasiliev pulled the thief in toward him.
"I

owe him the shirt off my back," he said. "If I stay, he'll have me killed.
He's

killed others, him and his comrades."

"He's not alone?" said the thief. He had pictured the card-player as
being a

man without associates; made him, in fact, in his own image.

Vasiliev blew his nose into his hand, and leaned back in the chair. It
creaked under his bulk.

"Who knows what's true or false in this place, eh?" he said, eyes
swimming.

"I mean, if I told you he had dead men with him, would you believe
me?" He answered

his own question with a shake of his head. "No. You'd think I was mad
. . ."

Once, the thief thought, this man had been capable of certainty; of
action;

perhaps even of heroism. Now all that noble stuff had been siphoned
off: the

champion was reduced to a sniveling rag, blabbering nonsense. He
inwardly applauded

the brilliance of Mamoulia's victory. He had always hated heroes.

"One last question-" he began.

"You want to know where you can find him."

"Yes."

The Russian stared at the ball of his thumb, sighing deeply. This was all so

wearisome.

"What do you gain if you play him?" he asked, and again returned his own

answer. "Only humiliation. Perhaps death."

The thief stood up. "Then you don't know where he is?" he said, making to

pocket the half-empty packet of cigarettes that lay on the table between them.

"Wait." Vasiliev reached for the pack before it slid out of sight. "Wait."

The thief placed the cigarettes back on the table, and Vasiliev covered them

with one proprietorial hand. He looked up at his interrogator as he spoke.

"The last time I heard, he was north of here. Up by Muranowski Square. You

know it?"

The thief nodded. It was not a region he relished visiting, but he knew it.

"And how do I find him, once I get there?" he asked.

The Russian looked perplexed by the question.

"I don't even know what he looks like," the thief said, trying to make Vasiliev understand.

"You won't need to find him," Vasiliev replied, understanding all too well.

"If he wants you to play, he'll find you."

3

The next night, the first of many such nights, the thief had gone looking for the

card-player. Though it was by now April, the weather was still bitter that year.

He'd come back to his room in the partially demolished hotel he occupied numb with

cold, frustration and-though he scarcely admitted it even to himself-fear. The

region around Muranowski Square was a hell within a hell. Many of the bomb craters

here let on to the sewers; the stench out of them was unmistakable. Others, used as

fire pits to cremate executed citizens, still flared intermittently when a flame

found a belly swollen with gas, or a pool of human fat. Every step taken in this

new-found land was an adventure, even to the thief. Death, its forms multitudinous,

waited everywhere. Sitting on the edge of a crater, warming its feet in the flames;

Page 223

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

standing, lunatic, amongst the refuse; at laughing play in a garden of bone and

shrapnel.

Fear notwithstanding, he'd returned to the district on several occasions;

but the card-player eluded him. And with every failed attempt, with every journey

that ended in defeat, the thief became more preoccupied with the pursuit. In his

mind this faceless gambler began to take on something of the force of legend. Just

to see the man in the flesh, to verify his physical existence in the same world that

he, the thief, occupied, became an article of faith. A means, God help him, by which

he could ratify his own existence

After a week and a half of fruitless searching, he went back to find

Vasiliev. The Russian was dead. His body, throat slit from ear to ear, had been

found the previous day, floating facedown in one of the sewers the Army was clearing

in Wola. He was not alone. There had been three other bodies with him, all

slaughtered in a similar fashion, all set alight and burning like fire ships as they

drifted down the tunnel on a river of excrement. One of the soldiers who had been in

the sewer when the flotilla appeared told the thief that the bodies had seemed to

float in the darkness. For a breathless moment it had been like the

steady approach

of angels.

Then, of course, the horror. Extinguishing the burning corpses, their hair, their

backs; then turning them over, and the face of Vasiliev, caught in the beam of a

flashlight, carrying a look of wonder, like a child in awe of some lethal conjuror.

His transfer papers had arrived that same afternoon.

In fact the papers seemed to have been the cause of an administrative error

that had closed Vasiliev's tragedy on a comic note. The bodies, once identified, had

been buried in Warsaw, except for Second Lieutenant Vasiliev, whose war record

demanding less cursory treatment. Plans were afoot to transport the body back to

Mother Russia, where he would be buried with state honors in his hometown. But

somebody, alighting upon the transfer papers, had taken them to apply to Vasiliev

dead, not Vasiliev living. Mysteriously, the body disappeared. Nobody would admit

responsibility: the corpse had simply been shipped out to some new posting.

Vasiliev's death merely served to intensify the thief's curiosity.

Mamouljian's arrogance fascinated him. Here was a scavenger, a man who made a living

off the weakness of others, who had yet grown so insolent with success that he dared

to murder-or have murdered on his behalf-those who crossed him. The thief became

jittery with anticipation. In his dreams, when he was able to sleep, he wandered in

Muranowski Square. It was filled with a fog like a living thing, which promised at

any moment to divide and reveal the card-player. He was like a man in love.

4

Tonight, the ceiling of squalid cloud above Europe had broken: blue, albeit pale,

had spread over his head, wider and wider. Now, toward evening, the sky was

absolutely clear above him. In the southwest vast cumulus, their cauliflower heads

tinted ocher and gold, were fattening with thunder, but the thought of their anger

only excited him. Tonight, the air was electric, and he would find the card-player,

he was sure. He had been sure since he woke that morning.

As evening began to fall he went north toward the square, scarcely thinking

of where he was going, the route was so familiar to him. He walked through two

checkpoints without being challenged, the confidence in his step password enough.

Tonight he was inevitable. His place here, breathing the scented, lilac air, stars

glimmering at his zenith, was unassailable. He felt static run in the hairs on the

back of his hand, and smiled. He saw a man, something unrecognizable in his arms,

screaming at a window, and smiled. Not far away, the Vistula, gross with rain and

melt-water, roared toward the sea. He was no less irresistible.

The gold went out of the cumulus; the lucid blue darkened toward night.

As he was about to come into Muranowski Square something flickered in front

of him, a twist of wind scooted past him, and the air was suddenly full of white

confetti. Impossible, surely, that there was a wedding taking place here? One of the

whirling fragments lodged on his eyelash, and he plucked it off. It wasn't confetti

at all: it was a petal. He pressed it between thumb and forefinger. Its scented oil

spilled from the fractured tissue.

In search of the source, he walked on a little way, and rounding the corner

into the square itself discovered the ghost of a tree, prodigious with blossom,

hanging in the air. It seemed unrooted, its snow-head lit by starlight, its trunk

shadowy. He held his breath, shocked by this beauty, and walked toward it as he

Page 224

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

might have approached a wild animal, cautious in case it took fright. Something

turned his stomach over. It wasn't awe of the blossom, or even the remnants of the

joy he'd felt walking here. That was slipping away. A different sensation gripped

him here in the square.

He was a man so used to atrocities that he had long counted himself

unblanchable. So why did he stand now a few feet away from the tree, his

fingernails, meticulously kept, pressed into his palms with anxiety, defying the

umbrella of flowers to unveil its worst? There was nothing to fear here. Just petals

in the air, shadow on the ground. And still he breathed shallowly, hoping against

hope that his fright was baseless.

Come on, he thought, if you've got something to show me, I'm waiting.

At his silent invitation two things happened. Behind him a guttural voice

asked: "Who are you?" in Polish. Distracted for the merest heartbeat by surprise,

his eyes lost focus on the tree, and in that instant a figure dislodged

itself from

beneath the blossom-weighted branches and slouched, momentarily,
into the starlight.

In the cheating murk the thief wasn't certain what he saw: a discarded
face looking

blankly in his direction perhaps, hair seared off. A scabby carcass,
wide as a

bull's. Vasiliev's vast hands.

All or nothing of this; and already the figure was retiring into hiding

beyond the tree, its wounded head brushing the branches as it went. A
drizzle of

petals fluttered onto its charcoal shoulders.

"Did you hear me?" said the voice at his back. The thief didn't turn. He

went on staring at the tree, narrowing his eyes, attempting to separate
substance

from illusion. But the man, whoever he was, had gone. It could not
have been the

Russian, of course; reason proclaimed against it. Vasiliev was dead,
found with his

face down in the filth of a sewer. His body was probably already on its
way to some

far-flung outpost of the Russian empire. He wasn't here; he couldn't be
here. But

the thief felt an urgent need to pursue the stranger nevertheless, just
to tap his

shoulder, to have him turn round, to look into his face and verify that
it was not

Konstantin. Too late already; the questioner behind him had taken fierce hold of his

arm, and was demanding an answer. The branches of the tree had stopped shaking, the

petals had stopped falling, the man was away.

Sighing, the thief turned to his interrogator.

The figure in front of him was smiling a welcome. It was a woman, despite

the rasp of the voice, dressed in oversized trousers, tied with a rope, but

otherwise naked. Her head was shaved; her toenails lacquered. All this he took in

with senses heightened from the shock of the tree, and from the pleasure of her

nudity. The sheened globes of her breasts were perfect. He felt his fists opening,

the palms tingling to touch them. But perhaps his appraisal of the body was too

frank. He glanced back up at her face to see if she was still smiling. She was; but

his gaze lingered on her face this time, and he realized that what he'd taken to be

a smile was a permanent fixture. Her lips had been sliced off, exposing gums and

teeth. There were ghastly scars on her cheeks, the remains of wounds that had

severed the tendons and induced a rictus that teased her mouth open. Her look

appalled him.

"You want . . . ?" she began.

Want? he thought, his eyes flicking back to the breasts. Her casual nudity

aroused him, despite the mutilation of her face. He was disgusted with the idea of

taking her-to kiss that lipless mouth was more than orgasm was worth-and yet if she

offered he'd accept, and damn the disgust.

"You want . . . ?" she began again, in that slurred hybrid of a voice,

neither male nor female. It was difficult for her to shape and expel words without

the aid of lips. She got the rest of the question out, however. "You want the

cards?"

He'd missed the point entirely. She had no interest in him, sexual or

otherwise. She was simply a messenger. Mamoulion was here. Within spitting distance,

probably. Perhaps watching him even now.

But the confusion of emotions in him blurred the elation he should have felt

at this moment. Instead of triumph, he grappled with a headful of contrary images:

blossom, breasts, darkness; the burned man's face, turning too briefly toward him;

lust, fear; a single star appearing from a flank of cloud. Hardly thinking of what

he was saying, he replied:

"Yes. I want the cards."

She nodded, turned away from him, and started past the tree, its branches

Page 225

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

still rocking where the man who was not Vasiliev had touched them, and crossed the

square. He followed. It was possible to forget this go-between's face while looking

at the grace of her barefooted steps. She didn't seem to care what she trod on. Not

once did she falter, despite the glass, brick and shrapnel underfoot.

She led him across to the remains of a large house on the opposite side of

the square. Its ravaged exterior, once impressive, still stood; there was even a

doorway in it, though no door. Through it, the light of a bonfire flickered. Rubble

from the interior spilled through the doorway and blocked the lower half, obliging

both woman and thief to duck down and scramble up into the house itself. In the

gloom the sleeve of his coat snagged on something; the cloth tore. She didn't turn

to see if he was hurt, though he cursed audibly. She simply led on over the mounds

of brick and fallen roof timbers while he stumbled after her, feeling ridiculously

clumsy. By the light of the bonfire he could see the size of the interior; this had

once been a fine house. There was little time for study, however. The woman was past

the fire now, and climbing toward a staircase. He followed, sweating. The fire spat;

he glanced around at it, and glimpsed somebody on the far side, keeping out of sight

behind the flames. Even as he watched, the fire keeper threw more tinder down, and a

constellation of livid specks was thrown up against the sky.

The woman was climbing the stairs. He hurried after her, his shadow-thrown

by the fire-huge on the wall. She was at the top of the stairs when he was halfway

up, and now she was slipping through a second doorway and gone. He followed on as

quickly as he could, and turned through the doorway after her.

The firelight only found its way fitfully into the room he'd stepped into,

and he could scarcely make anything out at first.

"Close the door," somebody asked. It took him a few beats to realize that

the request was being made of him. He half-turned, fumbled for the handle, found

that there was none, and pushed the door closed on aching hinges.

That done, he looked back into the room. The woman was standing two or three yards

in front of him, her perpetually amused face looking at him, the smile a gray

sickle.

"Your coat," she said, and stretched out her hands to help him shoulder it

off. Once done, she stepped out of his eyeline, and the object of his long search

came into view.

It was not Mamoulion, however, that took his eye at first. It was the carved

wooden altar piece set against the wall behind him, a Gothic masterwork which

blazed, even in the gloom, with gold and scarlet and blue. Spoils of war, the thief

thought; so that's what the bastard does with his fortune. Now he looked at the

figure in front of the triptych. A single wick, immersed in oil, guttered smokily on

the table at which he sat. The illumination it threw up on to the card-player's face

was bright but unstable.

"So, Pilgrim," the man said, "you found me. Finally."

"You found me, surely," the thief replied; it had been as Vasiliev had predicted.

"You fancy a game or two, I hear. Is that right?"

"Why not?" He tried to sound as nonchalant as possible, though his heart was

beating a double tattoo in his chest. Coming into the card-player's presence, he

felt pitifully unprepared. Sweat glued his hair to his forehead; there was brick

dust on his hands and muck under his nails: I must look, he squirmed, like the thief

I am.

By contrast, Mamoulion was a picture of propriety. There was nothing in the

sober clothes-the black tie, the gray suit-that suggested a profiteer: he appeared,

this legend, like a stockbroker. His face, like his dress, was unrepentantly plain,

its taut and finely etched skin waxen by the charmless oil flame. He looked sixty or

thereabouts, cheeks slightly hollowed, nose large, aristocratic; brow wide and high.

His hair had receded to the back of his skull; what remained was feathery and white.

But there was neither frailty nor fatigue in his posture. He sat upright in his

chair, and his agile hands fanned and gathered a pack of cards with loving

familiarity. Only his eyes belonged to the thief's dream of him. No stockbroker ever

had such naked eyes. Such glacial, unforgiving eyes.

"I hoped you'd come, Pilgrim. Sooner or later," he said. His English was

without inflection.

"Am I late?" the thief asked, half-joking.

Mamouliau laid the cards down. He seemed to take the inquiry quite seriously. "We'll see." He paused before saying, "You know, of course, that I play

Page 226

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

for very high stakes."

"I heard."

"If you wish to withdraw now, before we go any further, I would perfectly

understand." The little speech was made without a trace of irony.

"Don't you want me to play?"

Mamouliau pressed his thin, dry lips together and frowned. "On the contrary," he said, "I very much want you to play."

There was a flicker-was there not?-of pathos there. The thief wasn't sure if

it was a slip of the tongue, or the subtlest of theatrics. "But I am not sympathetic

. . ." he went on, "to those who do not pay their debts."

"You mean the lieutenant," the thief chanced.

Mamouliau stared at him. "I know no lieutenant," he said flatly. "I know

only gamblers, like myself. A few are good, most are not. They all come here to test

their mettle, as you have."

He had picked up the pack again, and it was moving in his hands as if the

cards were alive. Fifty-two moths fluttering in the queasy light, each one marked a

little differently from the last. They were almost indecently beautiful; their

glossy faces the most unflawed thing the thief had set eyes on in months.

"I want to play," he said, defying the hypnotic passage of cards.

"Then sit down, Pilgrim," Mamouliau said, as though the question had never

been at issue.

Almost soundlessly the woman had set a chair behind him. As he sat down, the

thief met Mamouliau's gaze. Was there anything in those joyless eyes that intended

him harm? No, nothing. There was nothing there to fear.

Murmuring his thanks for the invitation, he unbuttoned the cuffs of his

shirt and folded the sleeves back in preparation for play.

After a time, the game began.

Part Two

ASYLUM

The Devil is by no means the worst that there is; I would rather have dealings with

him than with many a human being. He honours his agreements much more promptly than

many a swindler on Earth. To be true, when payment is due he comes on the dot; just

as twelve strikes, fetches his soul and goes off home to Hell like a good Devil.

He's just a businessman as is right and proper.

J.N. NESTROY, Hollenangst

I

Providence

5

After serving six years of his sentence at Wandsworth, Marty Strauss was used to

waiting. He waited to wash and shave himself every morning; he waited to eat, he

waited to defecate; he waited for freedom. So much waiting. It was all part of the

punishment, of course; as was the interview he'd been summoned to this dreary

afternoon. But while the waiting had come to seem easy, the interviews never had. He

loathed the bureaucratic spotlight: the Parole File bulging with the Discipline

Reports, the Home Circumstance Reports, the Psychiatric Evaluations; the way every

few months you stood stripped in front of some uncivil servant while he told you

what a foul thing you were. It hurt him so much he knew he'd never be healed of it;

never forget the hot rooms filled with insinuation and dashed hopes. He'd dream them

forever.

"Come in, Strauss."

The room hadn't changed since he'd last been here; only become staler. The

man on the opposite side of the table hadn't changed either. His name was Somervale,

and there were any number of prisoners in Wandsworth who nightly said prayers for

his pulverization. Today he was not alone behind the plastic-topped table.

"Sit down, Strauss."

Marty glanced across at Somervale's associate. He was no prison officer. His

suit was too tasteful, his fingernails too well-manicured. He looked to be in late

middle-age, solidly built, and his nose was slightly crooked, as if it had once been

broken and then imperfectly reset. Somervale offered the introduction:

Page 227

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"Strauss. This is Mr. Toy . . ."

"Hello," Marty said.

The tanned face returned his gaze; it was a look of frank appraisal.

"I'm pleased to meet you," Toy said.

His scrutiny was more than casual curiosity, though what-thought
Marty-was

there to see? A man with time on his hands, and on his face; a body
grown sluggish

with too much bad food and too little exercise; an ineptly trimmed
mustache; a pair

of eyes glazed with boredom. Marty knew every dull detail of his own
appearance. He

wasn't worth a second glance any longer. And yet the bright blue eyes
stared on,

apparently fascinated.

"I think we should get down to business," Toy said to Somervale. He
put his

hands palm down on the tabletop. "How much have you told Mr.
Strauss?"

Mr. Strauss. The prefix was an almost forgotten courtesy.

"I've told him nothing," Somervale replied.

"Then we should begin at the beginning," Toy said. He leaned back in
his

chair, hands still on the table.

"As you like," said Somervale, clearly gearing himself up for a
substantial

speech. "Mr. Toy-" he began.

But he got no further before his guest broke in.

"If I may?" said Toy, "perhaps I can best summarize the situation."

"Whatever suits," said Somervale. He fumbled in his jacket pocket for a

cigarette, barely masking his chagrin. Toy ignored him. The off-center face

continued to look across at Marty.

"My employer-" Toy began "-is a man by the name of Joseph Whitehead. I don't

know if that means anything to you?" He didn't wait for a reply, but went on. "If

you haven't heard of him, you're doubtless familiar with the Whitehead Corporation,

which he founded. It's one of the largest pharmaceutical empires in Europe-"

The name rang a faint bell in Marty's head, and it had some scandalous

association. But it was tantalizingly vague, and he had no time to puzzle it

through, because Toy was in full flight.

"-Although Mr. Whitehead is now in his late sixties, he still keeps control

of the corporation. He's a self-made man, you understand, and he's dedicated his

life to its creation. He chooses, however, not to be as visible as he once was-"

A front-page photograph suddenly developed in Strauss' head. A man with his

hand up against the glare of a flashbulb; a private moment snatched by some lurking

paparazzo for public consumption.

"-He shuns publicity almost completely, and since his wife's death he has

little taste for the social arena-

Sharing the unwelcome attention Strauss remembered a woman whose beauty

astonished, even by the unflattering light. The wife of whom Toy spoke, perhaps.

"-Instead he chooses to mastermind his corporation out of the spotlight,

concerning himself in his leisure hours with social issues. Among them, overcrowding

in prisons, and the deterioration of the prison service generally."

The last remark was undoubtedly barbed, and found Somervale with deadly

accuracy. He ground out his half-smoked cigarette in the tinfoil ashtray, throwing

the other man a sour glance.

"When the time came to engage a new personal bodyguard-" Toy continued, "-it

was Mr. Whitehead's decision to seek a suitable candidate amongst men coming up for

parole rather than going through the usual agencies. "

He can't mean me, Strauss thought. The idea was too fine to tease himself

with, and too ludicrous. And yet if that wasn't it, why was Toy here, why all the

palaver?

"He's looking for a man who is nearing the end of his sentence. One who

deserves, in both his and my own estimation, to have an opportunity to be

reintroduced into society with a job behind him, and some self-esteem to go with it.

Your case was drawn to my attention, Martin. I may call you Martin?"

"Usually it's Marty."

"Fine. Marty it is. Frankly, I don't want to raise your hopes. I'm

interviewing several other candidates in addition to yourself, and of course at the

end of the day I may find that none are suitable. At this juncture I simply want to

ascertain whether you would be interested in such an option were it to be made

available to you."

Marty began to smile. Not outwardly, but inside, where Somervale couldn't

get at it.

Page 228

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"Do you understand what I'm asking?"

"Yes. I understand."

"Joe . . . Mr. Whitehead . . . needs somebody who will be completely devoted

to his well-being; who would indeed be prepared to put his life at risk rather than

have harm come to his employer. Now I realize that's a lot to ask."

Marty's brow furrowed. It was a lot, especially after the six-and-a-half year lesson in self-reliance he'd had at Wandsworth. Toy was swift to sense Marty's

hesitation.

"That bothers you," he said.

Marty shrugged gently. "Yes and no. I mean, I've never been asked to do that

before. I don't want to give you some shit about me being really keen to get killed

for somebody, because I'm not. I'd be lying through my teeth if I said I was."

Toy's nods encouraged Marty to go on.

"That's it really," he said.

"Are you married?" Toy asked.

"Separated."

"May I ask; are there divorce proceedings in the offing?"

Marty grimaced. He loathed talking about this. It was his wound; his to tend

and fret over. No fellow prisoner had ever wrung the story out of him, even in those

three-in-the-morning confessionals that he'd endured with his previous

cellmate,

before Feaver, who never talked of anything but food and paper women, had arrived.

But he would have to say something now. They surely had the details filed away

somehow anyway. Toy probably knew more about what Charmaine was doing, and with

whom, than he did.

"Charmaine and me . . ." He tried to summon words for this knot of feelings,

but nothing emerged but a blunt statement. "I don't think there's much chance of us

getting back together, if that's what you're after."

Toy sensed the raw edge in Marty's voice; so did Somervale. For the first

time since Toy had entered the arena the officer began to show some interest in the

exchange. He wants to watch me talk my way out of a job, Marty thought; he could see

the anticipation written all over Somervale's face. Well, damn him, he wasn't going

to have the satisfaction.

"It's not a problem-" Marty said flatly. "Or if it is, it's mine. I'm still

getting used to the fact that she won't be there when I get out. That's all it is,

really."

Toy was smiling now, an amiable smile.

"Really, Marty-" he said, "-I don't want to pry. I'm only concerned that we

understand the full facts of the situation. Were you to be employed by Mr.

Whitehead, you would be required to live on his estate with him, and it would be a

necessary condition of your employment that you could not leave without the express

permission of either Mr. Whitehead or myself. In other words you would not be

stepping into unconditional freedom. Far from it. You might wish to consider the

estate as a sort of open prison. It's important for me to know of any ties you have

that might make such constraints temptingly easy to break."

"Yes, I see."

"Furthermore, if for any reason your relationship with Mr. Whitehead was not

satisfactory; if you or he felt that the job was not suitable, then I'm afraid-"

"I'd be back here to finish my sentence."

"Yes."

There was an awkward pause, in which Toy sighed quietly. It took him only a

moment to recover his equilibrium, then he took off in a new direction.

"There's just a few more questions I'd like to ask. You've done some boxing, am I

right?"

"Some. A while back-"

Toy looked disappointed. "You gave it up?"

"Yes," Marty replied. "I kept on with the weight training for a while."

"Do you have any self-defense training of any kind? Judo? Karate?"

Marty contemplated lying, but what would be the use of that? All Toy had to

do was consult the screws at Wandsworth. "No," he said.

"Pity."

Marty's belly shrank. "I'm healthy though," he said. "And strong. I can

learn." He was aware that an unwelcome tremor had slipped into his voice from

somewhere.

"We don't want a learner, I'm afraid," Somervale pointed out, barely able to

Page 229

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

suppress the triumph in his tone.

Marty leaned forward across the table, trying to blot out Somervale's leechlike presence.

"I can do this job, Mr. Toy," he insisted, "I know I can do this job. Just give me a chance-"

The tremor was growing; his belly was an acrobat. Better stop now, before he

said or did something he regretted. But the words and the feelings just kept on

coming.

"Give me an opportunity to prove I can do it. That's not much to ask, is it?

And if I fuck it up it's my fault, see? Just a chance, that's all I'm asking."

Toy looked up at him with something like condolence in his face. Was it all

over then? Had he made up his mind already-one wrong answer and the whole thing goes

sour-was he already mentally packing up his briefcase and returning the Strauss, M.

file into Somervale's clammy hands to be slotted back between one forgotten con and

another?

Marty bit his tongue, and sat back in the uncomfortable chair, fixing his

gaze on his trembling hands. He couldn't bear to look at the bruised elegance of

Toy's face, not now that he'd opened himself up so wide. Toy would see in oh yes, to

all the hurt and the wanting, and he couldn't bear that.

"At your trial . . ." Toy said.

What now? Why was he prolonging the agony? All Marty wanted was to go to his

cell, where Feaver would be sitting on the bunk and playing with his dolls, where

there was a familiar dullness that he could take refuge 'n. But Toy wasn't finished;

he wanted the truth, the whole truth and nothing but.

"At your trial you testified that your prime motivation for involvement in

the robbery was to pay off substantial gambling debts. Am I correct?"

Marty had moved his attention from his hands to his shoes. The laces were undone,

and though they were long enough to be double-knotted he never had the patience to

work at complicated knots. He liked a simple bow. When you needed to untie a bow you

pulled and behold-like magic-it was gone.

"Is that right?" Toy asked again.

"Yes; that's right," Marty told him. He'd got so far; why not finish the

story? "There were four of us. And two guns. We tried to take a security van. Things

got out of hand." He glanced up from his shoes; Toy was watching intently. "The

driver was shot in the stomach. He died later. It's all in the file, isn't it?" Toy

nodded. "And about the van? Is that in the file too?" Toy didn't reply. "It was

empty," Marty said. "We had it wrong from the beginning. The fucking thing was

empty."

"And the debts?"

"Huh?"

"Your debts to Macnamara. They're still outstanding?"

The man was really beginning to get on Marty's nerves. What did Toy care if

he owed a few grand here and there? This was just sympathetic camouflage, so that he

could make a dignified exit.

"Answer Mr. Toy, Strauss," Somervale said.

"What's it to you?"

"Interest," said Toy, frankly.

"I see."

Sod his interest, Marty thought, he could choke on it. They'd had as much of

a confessional as they were going to get.

"Can I go now?" he said.

He looked up. Not at Toy but at Somervale, who was smirking behind his

cigarette smoke, well satisfied that the interview had been a disaster.

"I think so, Strauss," he said. "As long as Mr. Toy doesn't have any more

questions."

"No," said Toy, the voice dead. "No; I'm well satisfied."

Marty stood up, still avoiding Toy's eyes. The small room was full of ugly

sounds. The chair's heels scraping on the floor, the rasp of Somervale's

smoker's

cough. Toy was shunting away his notes. It was all over.

Somervale said: "You can go."

"I've enjoyed meeting you, Mr. Strauss," Toy said to Marty's back as he reached the door, and Marty turned around without thinking to see the other man

smiling at him, his hand extended to be shaken. I've enjoyed meeting you, Mr.

Strauss.

Page 230

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

Marty nodded and shook hands.

"Thank you for your time," Toy said.

Marty closed the door behind him and made his way back to his cell, escorted

by Priestley, the landing officer. They said nothing.

Marty watched the birds swooping in the roof of the building, alighting on

the landing rails for tidbits. They came and they went when it suited them, finding

niches to nest in, taking their sovereignty for granted. He envied them nothing. Or

if he did, now wasn't the time to admit to it.

6

Thirteen days passed, and there was no further word from either Toy

or Somervale.

Not that Marty was truly expecting any. The chance had been lost; he'd almost

stage-managed its final moments with his refusal to talk about Macnamara. That way

he had expected to nip any trial by hope in the bud. In that, he'd failed. No matter

how he tried to forget the interview with Toy, he couldn't. The encounter had thrown

him badly off-balance, and his instability was as distressing as its cause. He

thought he had learned the art of indifference by now, the same way that children

learned that hot water scalds: by painful experience.

He'd had plenty of that. During the first twelve months of his sentence he'd

fought against everything and everyone he'd encountered. He'd made no friends that

year, nor the least impression on the system; all he'd earned for his troubles were

bruises and bad times. In the second year, chastened by defeat, he'd gone

underground with his private war; he'd taken up weight training and boxing, and

concentrated on the challenge of building and maintaining a body that would serve

him when the time for retribution came round. But in the middle of the third year,

loneliness had intervened: an ache that no amount of self-inflicted punishment

(muscles driven to the pain threshold and beyond, day after day) could disguise. He

made a truce that year, with himself and his incarceration. It was an uneasy peace,

but things began to improve from then on. He even began to feel at home in the

echoing corridors, and in his cell, and in the shrinking enclave of his head, where

most pleasurable experience was now a distant memory.

The fourth year had brought new terrors. He was twenty-nine that year;

thirty loomed, and he remembered all too accurately how his younger self, with time

to burn had dismissed men his age as spent. It was a painful realization, and the

old claustrophobia (trapped not behind bars, but behind his life) returned more

forcibly than ever, and with it a new foolhardiness. He'd gained his tattoos that

year: a scarlet and blue lightning bolt on his upper left arm, and "USA" on his

right forearm. Just before Christmas Charmaine had written to him to suggest that a

divorce might be best, and he'd thought nothing of it. What was the use?

Indifference was the best remedy. Once you conceded defeat, life was a feather bed.

In the light of that wisdom, the fifth year was a breeze. He had access to dope; he

had the clout that came with being an experienced con; he had every damned thing but

his freedom, and that he could wait for.

And then Toy had come along, and try as hard as he could to forget he'd ever

heard the man's name, he found himself turning the half-hour of the interview over

and over in his head, examining every exchange in the minutest detail as though he

might turn up a nugget of prophecy. It was a fruitless exercise, of course, but it

didn't stop the rehearsals going on, and the process became almost comforting in its

way. He told nobody; not even Feaver. It was his secret: the room; Toy; Somervale's

defeat.

On the second Sunday after the meeting with Toy Charmaine came to visit. The

interview was the usual mess; like a transatlantic telephone call-all the timing

spoiled by the second delay between question and response. It wasn't the babble of

other conversations in the room that soured things, things were simply sour. No

avoiding that fact now. His early attempts at salvage had long since been abandoned.

After the cool inquiries about the health of relatives and friends it was down to

the nitty-gritty of dissolution.

He'd written to her in the early letters: You're beautiful, Charmaine. I

think of you at night, I dream about you all the time.

But then her looks had seemed to lose their edge-and anyway his dreams of

her face and body under him had stopped-and though he kept up the pretense in the

letters for a while his loving sentences had begun to sound patently fake, and he'd

stopped writing about such intimacies. It felt adolescent, to tell her he thought of

her face; what would she imagine him doing but sweating in the dark and playing with

Page 231

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

himself like a twelve-year-old? He didn't want her thinking that.

Maybe, on reflection, that had been a mistake. Perhaps the deterioration of

their marriage had begun there, with him feeling ridiculous, and giving up writing

love letters. But hadn't she changed too? Her eyes looked at him even now with such

naked suspicion.

"Flynn sends his regards."

"Oh. Good. You see him, do you?"

"Once in a while."

"How's he doing?"

She'd taken to looking at the clock, rather than at him, which he was glad of. It

gave him a chance to study her without feeling intrusive. When she allowed her

features to relax, he still found her attractive. But he had, he believed, perfect

control over his response to her now. He could look at her-at the translucent lobes

of her ears, at the sweep of her neck-and view her quite dispassionately. That, at

least, prison had taught him: not to want what he could not have.

"Oh, he's fine-" she replied.

It took him a moment to reorientate himself; who was she talking about? Oh,

yes: Flynn. There was a man who'd never got his fingers dirty. Flynn the wise; Flynn

the flash.

"He sends his best," she said.

"You told me," he reminded her.

Another pause; the conversation was more crucifying every time she came. Not

for him so much as for her. She seemed to go through a trauma every time she spat a

single word out.

"I went to see the solicitors again."

"Oh, yes."

"It's all going ahead, apparently. They said the papers would be through

next month."

"What do I do, just sign them?"

"Well . . . he said we needed to talk about the house, and all the stuff we've got together."

"You have it."

"But it's ours, isn't it? I mean, it belongs to both of us. And when you come out you're going to need somewhere to live, and furniture and everything. "

"Do you want to sell the house?"

Another wretched pause, as though she was trembling on the edge of saying

something far more important than the banalities that would surely surface.

"I'm sorry, Marty," she said.

"What for?"

She shook her head, a tiny shake. Her hair shimmered.

"Don't know," she said.

"This isn't your fault. None of this is your fault."

"I can't help-"

She stopped and looked up at him, suddenly more alive in the urgency of her

fright-was that what it was, fright?-than she'd been in a dozen other wooden

exchanges they'd endured in one chilling room or another. Her eyes were liquefying,

swelling up with tears.

"What's wrong?"

She stared at him: the tears brimmed.

"Char . . . what's wrong?"

"It's all over, Marty," she said, as though this fact had hit her for the first time; over, finished, fare thee well.

He nodded; "Yes."

"I don't want you . . ." She stopped, paused, then tried again. "You mustn't

blame me."

"I don't blame you. I've never blamed you. Christ, you've been here, haven't

you? All this time. I hate seeing you in this place, you know. But you came; when I

needed you, you were there."

"I thought it would be all right," she said, talking on as though he'd not

even spoken, "I really did. I thought you'd be coming out soon-and maybe we'd make

it work, you know. We still had the house and all. But these last

couple of years,

everything just started falling apart."

He watched her suffering, thinking: I'll never be able to forget this, because I caused it, and I'm the most miserable shit on God's earth because look

Page 232

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

what I did. There'd been tears at the beginning, of course, and letters from her

full of hurt and half-buried accusations, but this wracking distress she was showing

now went so much deeper. It wasn't from a twenty-two-year-old, for one thing, it was

coming from a grown woman; and it shamed him deeply to think he'd caused it, shamed

him in a way he thought he'd put behind him.

She blew her nose on a tissue teased from a packet.

"Everything's a mess," she said.

"Yes."

"I just want to sort it out."

She gave a cursory glance at her watch, too fast to register the time, and

stood up.

"I'd better go, Marty."

"Appointment?"

"No . . ." she replied, a transparent lie which she made no real effort to carry off, "might do some shopping later on. Always makes me feel better. You know me."

No, he thought. No I don't know you. If I once did, and I'm not even sure of

that, it was a different you, and God I miss her. He stopped himself. This was not

the way to part with her; he knew that from past encounters. The trick was to be

cold, to finish on a note of formality, so that he could go back to his cell and

forget her until the next time.

"I wanted you to understand," she said. "But I don't think I explained it very well. It's just such a bloody mess."

She didn't say goodbye: tears were beginning again, and he was certain that she was

frightened, under the talk of solicitors, that she would recant at the last

moment-out of weakness, or love, or both-and by walking out without turning around

she was keeping the possibility at bay.

Defeated, he went back to the cell. Feaver was asleep. He'd stuck a vulva

torn from one of his magazines onto his forehead with spit, a favorite routine of

his. It gaped-a third eye-above his closed lids, staring and staring

without hope of

sleep.

7

"Strauss?"

Priestley was at the open door, staring into the cell. Beside him, on the wall some wit had scrawled: "If you feel horny, kick the door. A cunt will appear."

It was a familiar joke-he'd seen the same gag or similar on a number of cell

walls-but now, looking at Priestley's thick face, the association of ideas-the enemy

and a woman's sex-struck him as obscene.

"Strauss?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Mr. Somervale wants to see you. About three-fifteen. I'll come and collect

you. Be ready at ten past."

"Yes, Sir."

Priestley turned to go.

"Can you tell me what it's about, Sir?"

"How the fuck should I know?"

Somervale was waiting in the Interview Room at three-fifteen. Marty's file was on

the table in front of him, its drawstrings still knotted. Beside it, a buff

envelope, unmarked. Somervale himself was standing by the reinforced glass window,

smoking.

"Come in," he said. There was no invitation to sit down; nor did he turn

from the window.

Marty closed the door behind him, and waited. Somervale exhaled smoke

through his nostrils noisily.

"What do you suppose, Strauss?" he said.

"I beg your pardon, sir?"

"I said: what do you suppose, eh? Imagine."

Marty followed none of this so far, and wondered if the confusion was his or

Somervale's. After an age, Somervale said: "My wife died."

Marty wondered what he was expected to say. As it was, Somervale didn't give

him time to formulate a response. He followed the first three words with five more:

"They're letting you out, Strauss!"

Page 233

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

He placed the bald facts side by side as if they belonged together; as if the entire world was in collusion against him.

"Am I going with Mr. Toy?" Marty asked.

"He and the board believe you are a suitable candidate for the job at

Whitehead's estate," Somervale said. "Imagine." He made a low sound in his throat,

which could have been laughter. "You'll be under close scrutiny, of course. Not by

me, but by whoever follows me. And if you once step out of line . . ."

"I understand."

"I wonder if you do." Somervale drew on his cigarette, still not turning around. "I wonder if you understand just what kind of freedom you've chosen-"

Marty wasn't about to let this kind of talk spoil his escalating euphoria.

Somervale was defeated; let him talk.

"Joseph Whitehead may be one of the richest men in Europe but he's also one

of the most eccentric, I hear. God knows what you're letting yourself in for, but I

tell you, I think you may find life in here a good deal more palatable."

Somervale's words evaporated; his sour grapes fell on deaf ears. Either through exhaustion, or because he sensed that he'd lost his audience, he gave up his

disparaging monologue almost as soon as it began, and turned from the window to

finish this distasteful business as expeditiously as he could. Marty was shocked to

see the change in the man. In the weeks since they'd last met, Somervale had aged

years; he looked as though he'd survived the intervening time on cigarettes and

grief. His skin was like stale bread.

"Mr. Toy will pick you up from the gates next Friday afternoon. That's February thirteenth. Are you superstitious?"

"No."

Somervale handed the envelope across to Marty.

"All the details are in there. In the next couple of days you'll have a medical, and somebody will be here to go through your position vis-à-vis the parole

board. Rules are being bent on your behalf, Strauss. God knows why. There's a dozen

more worthy candidates in your wing alone." Marty opened the envelope, quickly

scanned the tightly typed pages, and pocketed them.

"You won't be seeing me again," Somervale was saying, "for which I'm sure you're

suitably grateful."

Marty let not a flicker of response cross his face. His feigned indifference

seemed to ignite a pocket of unused loathing in Somervale's fatigued frame His bad

teeth showed as he said: "If I were you, I'd thank God, Strauss. I'd thank God from

the bottom of my heart."

"What for . . . Sir?"

"But then I don't suppose you've got much room for God, have you?"

The words contained pain and contempt in equal measure. Marty couldn't help

thinking of Somervale alone in a double bed; a husband without a wife, and without

the faith to believe in seeing her again; incapable of tears. And another thought

came fast upon the first: that Somervale's stone heart, which had been broken at one

terrible stroke, was not so dissimilar from his own. Both hard men, both keeping the

world at bay while they waged private wars in their guts. Both ending up with the

very weapons they'd forged to defeat their enemies turned on themselves. It was a

vile realization, and had Marty not been buoyant with the news of his release he

might not have dared think it. But there it was. He and Somervale, like two lizards

lying in the same stinking mud, suddenly seemed very like twins.

"What are you thinking, Strauss?" Somervale asked.

Marty shrugged.

"Nothing," he said.

"Liar," said the other. Picking up the file, he walked out of the Interview

Room, leaving the door open behind him.

Marty telephoned Charmaine the following day, and told her what

had

happened. She seemed pleased, which was gratifying. When he came off the phone he

was shaking, but he felt good.

He lived the last few days at Wandsworth with stolen eyes, or that's how it

seemed. Everything about prison life that he had become so used to-the casual

cruelty, the endless jeering, the power games, the sex games-all seemed new to him

again, as they had been six years before.

They were wasted years, of course. Nothing could bring them back, nothing

could fill them up with useful experience. The thought depressed him. He had so

little to go out into the world with. Two tattoos, a body that had seen better days,

Page 234

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

memories of anger and despair. In the journey ahead he was going to be traveling

light.

8

The night before he left Wandsworth he had a dream. His nightlife had not been much

to shout about during the years of his sentence. Wet dreams about Charmaine had soon

stopped, as had his more exotic flights of fancy, as though his subconscious,

sympathetic to confinement, wanted to avoid taunting him with dreams of freedom.

Once in a while he'd wake in the middle of the night with his head swimming in

glories, but most of his dreams were as pointless and as repetitive as his waking

life. But this was a different experience altogether.

He dreamed a cathedral of sorts, an unfinished, perhaps unfinishable,

masterpiece of towers and spires and soaring buttresses, too vast to exist in the

physical world-gravity denied it-but here, in his head, an awesome reality. It was

night as he walked toward it, the gravel crunching underfoot, the air smelling of

honeysuckle, and from inside he could hear singing. Ecstatic voices, a boys' choir

he thought, rising and falling wordlessly. There were no people visible in the

silken darkness around him: no fellow tourists to gape at this wonder. Just him, and

the voices.

And then, miraculously, he flew.

He was weightless, and the wind had him, and he was ascending the steep side

of the cathedral with breath-snatching velocity. He flew, it seemed, not like a

bird, but, paradoxically, like some airborne fish. Like a dolphin-yes, that's what

he was-his arms close by his side sometimes, sometimes plowing the blue air as he

rose, a smooth, naked thing that skimmed the slates and looped the spires,

fingertips grazing the dew on the stonework, flicking raindrops off the gutter

pipes. If he'd ever dreamed anything so sweet, he couldn't remember it. The

intensity of his joy was almost too much, and it startled him awake.

He was back, wide-eyed, in the forced heat of the cell, with Feaver on the

bunk below, masturbating. The bunk rocked rhythmically, speed increasing, and Feaver

climaxed with a stifled grunt. Marty tried to block reality, and concentrate on

recapturing his dream. He closed his eyes again, willing the image back to him,

saying come on, come on to the dark. For one shattering moment, the dream returned:

only this time it wasn't triumph, it was terror, and he was pitching out of the sky

from a hundred miles high, and the cathedral was rushing toward him, its spires

sharpening themselves on the wind in preparation for his arrival

He shook himself awake, canceling the plunge before it could be finished,

and lay the rest of the night staring at the ceiling until a wretched gloom, the

first light of dawn, spilled through the window to announce the day.

9

No profligate sky greeted his release. Just a commonplace Friday afternoon, with

business as usual on Trinity Road.

Toy had been waiting for him in the reception wing when Marty was brought

down from his landing. He had longer yet to wait, while the officers went through a

dozen bureaucratic rituals; belongings to be checked and returned, release papers to

be signed and countersigned. It took almost an hour of such formalities before they

unlocked the doors and let them both out into the open air.

With little more than a handshake of welcome Toy led him across the

forecourt of the prison to where a dark red Daimler was parked, the driver's seat

occupied.

"Come on, Marty," he said, opening the door, "too cold to linger."

It was cold: the wind was vicious. But the chill couldn't freeze his joy. He

was a free man, for God's sake; free within carefully prescribed limits perhaps, but

it was a beginning. He was at least putting behind him all the paraphernalia of

prison: the bucket in the corner of the cell, the keys, the numbers.
Now he had to

be the equal of the choices and opportunities that would lead from
here.

Toy had already taken refuge in the back of the car.

"Marty," he summoned again, his suede-gloved hand beckoning. "We
should

hurry, or we'll get snarled up getting out of the city."

"Yes. I'm here-"

Marty got in. The interior of the car smelled of polish, stale cigar
smoke

and leather; luxuriant scents.

"Should I put the case in the boot?" Marty said.

Page 235

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

The driver turned from the wheel.

"You got room back there," he said. A West Indian, dressed not in

chauffeur's livery but in a battered leather flying jacket, looked Marty
up and

down. He offered no welcoming smile.

"Luther," said Toy, "this is Marty."

"Put the case over the front seat," the driver replied; he leaned across
and

opened the front passenger door. Marty got out and slid his case and
plastic bag of

belongings onto the front seat beside a litter of newspapers and a thumbled copy of

Playboy, then got into the back with Toy and slammed the door.

"No need to slam," said Luther, but Marty scarcely heard the remark. Not

many cons get picked up from the gates of Wandsworth in a Daimler, he was thinking:

maybe this time I've fallen on my feet.

The car purred away from the gates and made a left onto Trinity Road. "Luther's been

with the estate for two years," Toy said.

"Three," the other man corrected him.

"Is it?" Toy replied. "Three then. He drives me around; takes Mr. Whitehead

when he goes down to London."

"Don't do that no more."

Marty caught the driver's eye in the mirror.

"You been in that shit-house long?" the man asked, pouncing without a

flicker of hesitation.

"Long enough," Marty replied.-He wasn't going to try to hide anything; there

was no sense in that. He waited for the next inevitable question: what were you in

for? But it didn't come. Luther turned his attention back to the business of the

road, apparently satisfied. Marty was happy to let the conversation drop. All he

wanted to do was watch this brave new world go by, and drink it all in. The people,

the shopfronts, the advertisements, he had a hunger for all the details, no matter

how trivial. He glued his eyes to the window. There was so much to see, and yet he

had the distinct impression that it was all artificial, as though the people in the

street, in the other cars, were actors, all cast to type and playing their parts

immaculately. His mind, struggling to accommodate the welter of information-on every

side a new vista, at every corner a different parade passing-simply rejected their

reality. It was all stage-managed, his brain told him, all a fiction. Because look,

these people behaved as though they'd lived without him, as though the world had

gone on while he'd been locked away, and some childlike part of him-the part that,

hiding its eyes, believes itself hidden-could not conceive of a life for anyone

without him to see it.

His common sense told him otherwise, of course. Whatever his confused senses

might suspect, the world was older, and more weary probably, since he and it had

last met. He would have to renew his acquaintance with it: learn how its nature had

changed; learn again its etiquette, its touchiness, its potential for pleasure.

They crossed the river via the Wandsworth Bridge and drove through Earl's

Court and Shepherd's Bush onto Westway. It was the middle of a Friday afternoon, and

the traffic was heavy; commuters eager to be home for the weekend. He stared

blatantly at the faces of the drivers in the cars they overtook, guessing occupations, or trying to catch the eyes of the women.

Mile by mile, the strangeness he'd felt initially began to wear off, and by

the time they reached the M40 he was starting to tire of the spectacle. Toy had

nodded off in his corner of the back seat, his hands in his lap. Luther was occupied

with leapfrogging down the highway.

Only one event stowed their progress. Twenty miles short of Oxford blue

lights flashed on the road up ahead, and the sound of a siren speeding toward them

from behind announced an accident. The procession of cars slowed, like a line of

mourners pausing to glance into a coffin.

A car had slewed across the eastbound lanes, crossed the divide, and met,

head-on, a van coming in the opposite direction. All of the westbound lanes were

blocked, either by wreckage or by police cars, and the travelers were obliged to use

the shoulder to skirt the scattered wreckage. "What's happened; can you see?" Luther

asked, his attention too occupied by navigating past the signaling policeman for him

to see for himself. Marty described the scene as best he could.

A man, with blood streaming down his face as if somebody had cracked a

blood-yolked egg on his head, was standing in the middle of the chaos, hypnotized by

shock. Behind him a group-police and rescued passengers alike-gathered around the

concertinaed front section of the car to speak to somebody trapped in the driver's

Page 236

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

seat. The figure was slumped, motionless. As they crept past, one of these

comforters, her coat soaked either with her own blood or that of the driver, turned

away from the vehicle and began to applaud. At least that was how Marty interpreted

the slapping together of her hands: as applause. It was as if she were suffering the

same delusion he'd tasted so recently-that this was all some

meticulous but

distasteful illusion-and at any moment it would all come to a welcome end. He wanted

to lean out of the car window and tell her that she was wrong; that this was the

real world-long-legged women, crystal sky and all. But she'd know that tomorrow,

wouldn't she? Plenty of time for grief then. But for now she clapped, and she was

still clapping when the accident slid out of sight behind them.

II

The Fox

10

Asylum, Whitehead knew, was a traitorous word. In one breath it meant a sanctuary, a

place of refuge, of safety. In another, its meaning twisted on itself: asylum came

to mean a madhouse, a hole for broken minds to bury themselves in. It was, he

reminded himself, a semantic trick, no more. Why then did the ambiguity run in his

head so often?

He sat in that too-comfortable chair beside the window where he had sat now

for a season of evenings watching the night begin to skulk across the lawn and

thinking, without much shape to his ruminations, about how one

thing became another;

about how difficult it was to hold on to anything. Life was a random business.

Whitehead had learned that lesson years ago, at the hands of a master, and he had

never forgotten it. Whether you were rewarded for your good works or skinned alive,

it was all down to chance. No use to cleave to some system of numbers or divinities;

they all crumbled in the end. Fortune belonged to the man who was willing to risk

everything on a single throw.

He'd done that. Not once, but many times at the beginning of his career,

when he was still laying the foundations of his empire. And thanks to that

extraordinary sixth sense he possessed, the ability to preempt the roll of the dice,

the risks had almost always paid off. Other corporations had their virtuosi:

computers that calculated the odds to the tenth place, advisers who kept their ears

pressed to the stock markets of Tokyo, London and New York, but they were all

overshadowed by Whitehead's instinct. When it came to knowing the moment, for

sensing the collision of time and opportunity that made a good decision into a great

one, a commonplace takeover into a coup, nobody was Old Man Whitehead's superior,

and all the smart young men in the corporation's boardrooms knew that. Joe's

oracular advice still had to be sought before any significant expansion was

undertaken or contract signed.

He guessed this authority, which remained absolute, was resented in some

circles. No doubt there were those who thought he should let go his hold completely

and leave the university men and their computers to get on with business. But

Whitehead had won these skills, these unique powers of second-guessing, at some

hazard; foolish then that they lie forgotten when they could be used to lay a finger

on the wheel. Besides, the old man had an argument the young turks could never

gainsay: his methods worked. He'd never been properly schooled; his life before fame

was-much to the journalists' dismay-a blank, but he had made the Whitehead

Corporation out of nothing. Its fate, for better or worse, was still his passionate

concern.

There was no room for passion tonight, however, sitting in that chair (a

chair to die in, he'd sometimes thought) beside the window. Tonight there was only

unease: that old man's complaint.

How he loathed age! It was hardly bearable to be so reduced. Not that he was

infirm; just that a dozen minor ailments conspired against his comfort so that

seldom a day passed without some irritation-an ulcerous mouth, or a chafing between

the buttocks that itched furiously-fixing his attentions in the body when the urge

to self-preservation called them elsewhere. The curse of age, he'd decided, was

distraction, and he couldn't afford the luxury of negligent thinking. There was

danger in contemplating itch and ulcer. As soon as his mind was turned, something

would take out his throat. That was what the unease was telling him. Don't look away

for a moment; don't think you're safe because, old man, I've a message for you: the

Page 237

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

worst is yet to come.

Toy knocked once before entering the study.

"Bill . . ."

Whitehead momentarily forgot the lawn and the advancing darkness

as he

turned to face his friend.

". . . you got here."

"Of course we got here, Joe. Are we late?"

"No, no. No problems?"

"Things are fine."

"Good."

"Strauss is downstairs."

In the diminishing light Whitehead crossed to the table and poured himself a

sparing glass of vodka. He had been holding off from drinking until now; a shot to

celebrate Toy's safe arrival.

"You want one?"

It was a ritual question, with a ritual response: "No thanks."

"You're going back to town, then?"

"When you've seen Strauss."

"It's too late for the theater. Why don't you stay, Bill? Go back tomorrow

morning when it's light."

"I've got business," Toy said, allowing himself the gentlest of smiles on the final word. This was another ritual, one of many between the two men. Toy's

business in London, which the old man knew had nothing to do with the corporation,

went unquestioned; it always had.

"And what's your impression?"

"Of Strauss? Much as I thought at the interview. I think he'll be fine. And

if he isn't, there's plenty more where he came from."

"I need someone who isn't going to scare easily. Things could get very unpleasant."

Toy offered a noncommittal grunt and hoped that the talk on this matter

wouldn't go any further. He was tired after a day of waiting and traveling, and he

wanted to look forward to the evening; this was no time to talk over that business

again.

Whitehead had put down his drained glass on the tray and gone back to the

window. It was darkening in the room quite rapidly now, and when the old man stood

with his back to Toy he was welded by shadow into something monolithic. After thirty

years in Whitehead's employ-three decades with scarcely a cross word spoken between

them-Toy was still as much in awe of Whitehead as of some potentate with the power

of life and death over him. He still took a pause to find his equilibrium before

entering into Whitehead's presence; he still found traces of the stammer he'd had

when they'd met returning on occasion. It was a legitimate response, he felt. The

man was power: more power than he could ever hope, or indeed would ever want, to

possess: and it sat with deceptive lightness on Joe Whitehead's substantial

shoulders. In all their years of association, in conference or boardroom, he had

never seen Whitehead want for the appropriate gesture or remark. He was simply the

most confident man Toy had ever met: certain to his marrow of his own supreme worth,

his skills honed to such an edge that a man could be undone by a word, gutted for

life, his self-esteem drained and his career tattered. Toy had seen it done

countless times, and often to men he considered his betters. Which begged the

question (he asked it even now, staring at Whitehead's back): why did the great man

pass the time of day with him? Perhaps it was simply history. Was

that it? History

and sentiment.

"I'm thinking of filling in the outdoor pool."

Toy thanked God Whitehead had changed the subject. No talk of the past, for

tonight at least.

"I don't swim out there any longer, even in the summer."

"Put some fishes in."

Whitehead turned his head slightly to see if there was a smile on Toy's face. He

never signaled a joke in the tone of his voice, and it was easy, Whitehead knew, to

offend the man's sensibilities if one laughed when no joke was intended, or the

other way about. Toy wasn't smiling.

"Fishes?" said Whitehead.

"Ornamental carp, perhaps. Aren't they called koi? Exquisite things." Toy

liked the pool. At night it was lit from below, and the surface moved in mesmerizing

Page 238

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

eddies, the turquoise enchanting. If there was a chill in the air the heated water

gave off a wispy breath that melted away six inches from the surface. In fact,

though he'd hated swimming, the pool was a favorite place of his. He wasn't certain

if Whitehead knew this: he probably did. Papa knew most things, he'd found, whether

they'd been voiced or not.

"You like the pool," Whitehead stated.

There: proof.

"Yes. I do."

"Then we'll keep it."

"Well not just--"

Whitehead raised his hand to ward off further debate, pleased to be giving

this gift.

"We'll keep it," he said. "And you can fill it with koi."

He sat back down in the chair.

"Shall I put the lawn lights on?" Toy asked.

"No," said Whitehead. The dying light from the window cast his head in

bronze, a latter-day Medici perhaps, with his weary-lidded, pit-set eyes, the white

beard and mustache cropped nickingly close to his skin, the whole construction

seemingly too weighty for the column supporting it. Aware that his eyes were boring

into the old man's back, and that Joe would surely sense it, Toy sloughed off the

lethargy of the room and pressed himself back into action.

"Well . . . shall I fetch Strauss, Joe? Do you want to see him or not?"
The

words took an age to cross the room in the thickening darkness. For
several

heartbeats Toy wasn't even certain that Whitehead had heard him.

Then the oracle spoke. Not a prophecy, but a question.

"Will we survive, Bill?"

The words were spoken so quietly they only just carried, hooked on
motes of

dust and wafted from his lips. Toy's heart sank. It was the old theme
again: the

same paranoid song.

"I hear more and more rumors, Bill. They can't all be groundless."

He was still looking out the window. Rooks circled above the wood
half a

mile or so across the lawn. Was he watching them? Toy doubted it.
He'd seen

Whitehead like this often of late, sunk down into himself, scanning the
past with

his mind's eye. It wasn't a vision Toy had access to, but he could guess
at Joe's

present fears-he'd been there, after all, in the early days-and he knew
too that

however much he loved the old man there were some burdens he
would never be capable,

or willing, to share. He wasn't strong enough; he was at heart still the

boxer

Whitehead had employed as a bodyguard three decades before. Now, of course, he wore

a four-hundred-pound suit, and his nails were as immaculately kept as his manners.

But his mind was the same as ever, superstitious and fragile. The dreams the great

dreamed were not for him. Nor were their nightmares.

Again, Whitehead posed the haunted question:

"Will we survive?"

This time Toy felt obliged to reply.

"Everything's fine, Joe. You know it is. Profits up in most sectors . . ."

But evasion wasn't what the old man wanted and Toy knew it. He let the words

falter, leaving a silence, after the faltering, more wretched than ever. Toy's

stare, now fixed on Whitehead again, was unblinking, and at the corners of his eyes

the murk that had taken over the room began to flicker and crawl. He dropped his

lids: they almost grated across his eyeballs. Patterns danced in his head (wheels,

stars and windows) and when he opened his eyes again the night finally had a

stranglehold on the interior.

The bronze head remained unmoved. But it spoke, and the words seemed to come

from Whitehead's bowels, dirtied with fear.

"I'm afraid, Willy," he said. "All my life I've never been as frightened as I am now."

He spoke slowly, without the least emphasis, as if he despised the melodrama

of his words and was refusing to magnify it further.

"All these years, living without fear; I'd forgotten what it was like. How

crippling it is. How it drains your willpower. I just sit here, day in, day out.

Locked up in this place, with the alarms, the fences, the dogs. I watch the lawn and

the trees-

He was watching.

"-and sooner or later, the light begins to fade."

Page 239

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

He paused: a long, deep hush, except for the distant crows.

"I can bear the night itself. It's not pleasant, but it's unambiguous. It's twilight I can't deal with. That's when the bad sweats come over me. When the

light's going, and nothing's quite real anymore, quite solid. Just forms. Things

that once had shapes . . ."

It had been a winter of such evenings: colorless drizzles that eroded

distance and killed sound; weeks on end of uncertain light, when troubled dawn

became troubled dusk with no day intervening. There had been too few hard-frosted

days like today; just one discouraging month upon another.

"I sit here every evening now," the old man was saying. "It's a test I set myself. Just to sit and watch everything eroded. Defying it all."

Toy could taste the profundity of Papa's despair. He hadn't been like this

ever before; not even after Evangeline's death.

It was almost completely dark outside and in; without the lawn lights on,

the grounds were pitch. But Whitehead still sat, facing the black window, watching.

"It's all there, of course," he said.

"What is?"

"The trees, the lawn. When dawn comes tomorrow they'll be waiting."

"Yes, of course."

"You know, as a child I thought somebody came and took the world away in the

night and then came back and unrolled it all again the following morning."

He stirred in his seat; his hand moved to his head. Impossible to see what

he was doing.

"The things we believe as children: they never leave us, do they?"

They're

just waiting for time to roll around, and us to start believing in them all over

again. It's the same old patch, Bill. You know? I mean, we think we move on, we get

stronger, we get wiser, but all the time we're standing on the same patch."

He sighed, and looked around at Toy. Light from the hallway fawned through

the door, which Toy had left slightly ajar. By it, even across the room, Whitehead's

eyes and cheeks glittered with tears.

"You'd better put on the light, Bill," he said. Yes."

"And bring up Strauss."

There was no sign of his distress apparent in his voice. But then Joe was an

expert at disguising his feelings; Toy knew that of old. He could close down the

hoods of his eyes and seal up his mouth, and not even a mindreader could work out

what he was thinking. It was a skill he'd used to devastating effect in the

boardroom: nobody ever knew which way the old fox would jump. He'd learned the

technique playing cards, presumably. That, and how to wait.

They had driven through the electric gates of Whitehead's estate and

into another

world. Lawns laid out immaculately on either side of the sepia-graveled driveway; a

distant aspect of woodland off to the right, which disappeared behind a line of

cypresses as they bore around toward the house itself. It was late afternoon by the

time they arrived, but the mellowing light only enhanced the charm of the place, its

formality offset by a rising mist that blurred the scalpel edge of grass and tree.

The main building was less spectacular than Marty had anticipated; just a

large, Georgian country house, solid but plain, with modern extensions sprawling

away from the main structure. They drove past the front door, with its white

pillared porch, to a side entrance, and Toy invited him through into the kitchen.

"Put your bags down and help yourself to some coffee," he said. "I'm just

going up to see the boss man. Make yourself comfortable."

Alone for the first time since leaving Wandsworth Marty felt uncomfortable.

The door was open at his back; there were no locks on the windows, no officers

patrolling the corridors beyond the kitchen. It was paradoxical, but he felt

unprotected, almost vulnerable. After a few minutes he got up from the table,

switched on the fluorescent light (night was falling quickly, and there were no

automatic switches here) and poured himself a mug of black coffee from the

percolator. It was heavy and slightly bitter, brewed and rebrewed he guessed, not

like the insipid stuff he was used to.

It was twenty-five minutes before Toy came back in, apologized for the

delay, and told him that Mr. Whitehead would see him now.

"Leave your bags," he said. "Luther will see to them."

Toy led the way from the kitchen, which was part of the extension, into the

Page 240

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

main house. The corridors were gloomy, but everywhere Marty's eye was amazed. The

building was a museum. Paintings covered the walls from floor to ceiling; on the

tables and shelves were vases and ceramic figurines whose enamels gleamed. There was

no time to linger, however. They wove through the maze of halls, Marty's sense of

direction more confounded with every turn, until they reached the study. Toy

knocked, opened the door, and ushered Marty in.

With little but a badly remembered photograph of Whitehead to build upon,

Marty's portrait of his new employer had been chiefly invention-and totally wrong.

Where he'd imagined frailty, he found robustness. Where he'd expected the

eccentricity of a recluse he found a furrowed, subtle face that scanned him, even as

he entered the study, with efficiency and humor.

"Mr. Strauss," said Whitehead, "welcome."

Behind Whitehead, the curtains were still open, and through the window the

floodlights suddenly came on, illuminating the piercing green of the lawns for a

good two hundred yards. It was like a conjurer's trick, the sudden appearance of

this sword, but Whitehead ignored it. He walked toward Marty. Though he was a large

man, and much of his bulk had turned to fat, the weight sat on his frame quite

easily. There was no sense of awkwardness. The grace of his gait, the almost oiled

smoothness of his arm as he extended it to Marty, the suppleness of the proffered

fingers, all suggested a man at peace with his physique.

They shook hands. Either Marty was hot, or the other man cold: Marty

immediately took the error to be his. A man like Whitehead was surely never too hot

or too cold; he controlled his temperature with the same ease he controlled his

finances. Hadn't Toy dropped into their few exchanges in the car the fact that

Whitehead had never been seriously ill in his life? Now Marty was face-to-face with

the paragon he could believe it. Not a whisper of flatulence would dare this man's

bowels.

"I'm Joseph Whitehead," he said. "Welcome to the Sanctuary."

"Thank you."

"You'll have a drink? Celebrate."

"Yes, please."

"What will it be?"

Marty's mind suddenly went blank, and he found himself gaping like a stranded fish. It was Toy, God save him, who suggested:

"Scotch?"

"That'd be fine."

"The usual for me," said Whitehead. "Come and sit down, Mr. Strauss."

They sat. The chairs were comfortable; not antiques, like the tables in the

corridors, but functional, modern pieces. The entire room shared this style: it was

a working environment, not a museum. The few pictures on the dark blue walls looked,

to Marty's uneducated eye, as recent as the furniture they were large and slapdash.

The most prominently placed, and the most representational, was signed Matisse, and

pictured a bilious pink Woman sprawled on a bilious yellow chaise longue.

"Your whisky."

Marty accepted the glass Toy was offering.

"We had Luther buy you a selection of new clothes; they're up in your room,"

Whitehead was telling Marty. "Just a couple of suits, shirts and so on, to start

with. Later on, we'll maybe send you out shopping for yourself." He drained his

glass of neat vodka before continuing. "Do they still issue suits to prisoners, or

did they discontinue that? Smacks of the poorhouse, I suppose. Wouldn't be too

tactful in these enlightened times. People might begin to think you were criminals

by necessity-"

Marty wasn't at all sure about this line of chat: was Whitehead making fun

of him? The monologue went on, its tenor quite friendly, while Marty tried to sort

out irony from straightforward opinion. It was difficult. He was

reminded, in the

space of a few minutes listening to Whitehead talk, of how much subtler things were

on the outside. By comparison with this man's shifting, richly inflected talk the

cleverest conversationalist in Wandsworth was an amateur. Toy slipped a second large

whisky into Marty's hand, but he scarcely noticed. Whitehead's voice was hypnotic;

and strangely soothing.

"Toy has explained your duties to you, has he?"

"Yes, I think so."

"I want you to make this house your home, Strauss. Become familiar with it.

There are one or two places that will be out-of-bounds to you; Toy will tell you

Page 241

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

where. Please observe those constraints. The rest of the place is at your disposal."

Marty nodded, and downed his whisky; it ran down his gullet like quicksilver.

"Tomorrow . . ."

Whitehead stood up, the thought unfinished, and returned to the window. The

grass shone as though freshly painted.

". . . we'll take a walk around the place, you and I."

"Fine."

"See what's to be seen. Introduce you to Bella, and the others."

There was more staff? Toy hadn't mentioned them; but inevitably there would

be others here: guards, cooks, gardeners. The place probably swarmed with

functionaries.

"Come talk to me tomorrow, eh?"

Marty drained the rest of his scotch and Toy gestured that he should stand

up. Whitehead seemed suddenly to have lost interest in them both. His assessment was

over, at least for today; his thoughts were already elsewhere, his stare directed

out of the window at the gleaming lawn.

"Yes, sir. Tomorrow."

"But before you come-" Whitehead said, glancing around at Marty.

"Yes, sir."

"Shave off your mustache. Anybody would think you'd got something to hide."

12

Toy gave Marty a perfunctory tour of the house before taking him upstairs, promising

a more thorough walkabout when time wasn't so pressing. Then he delivered Marty to a

long, airy room on the top story, and at the side of the house.

"This is yours," he said. Luther had left the suitcase and the plastic bag on the bed; their tattiness looked out of place in the sleek utility of the room. It

had, like the study, contemporary fittings.

"It's a bit bare at the moment," said Toy. "So do whatever you want with it.

If you've got photographs-"

"Not really."

"Well, we ought to get something on the walls. There are some books"-he

noddled to the far end of the room, where several shelves groaned under a weight of

volumes-"but the library downstairs is at your disposal. I'll show you the layout

sometime next week, when you've settled in. There's a video up here, too, and

another downstairs. Again, Joe doesn't really have much interest in it, so help

yourself."

"Sounds good."

"There's a small dressing room through to the left. As Joe said, you'll find

some fresh clothes in there. Your bathroom is through the other door. Shower and so

on. And I think that's it. I hope it's adequate."

"It's fine," Marty said. Toy glanced at his watch and turned to leave.

"Just before you go . . ."

"Problem?"

"No problem," Marty said. "Jesus, no problem at all. I just want you to know

I'm grateful-"

"No need."

"But I am," Marty insisted; he'd been trying to find a cue for this speech

since Trinity Road. "I'm very grateful. I don't know how or why you chose me-but I

appreciate it."

Toy was mildly discomfited by this show of feeling, but Marty was glad to

have it said.

"Believe me, Marty. I wouldn't have chosen you if I didn't think you could

do the job. You're here now. It's up to you to make the best of it. I'm going to be

around, of course, but after this you're more or less your own man."

"Yes. I realize that."

"I'll leave you then. See you at the beginning of the week. Pearl's left food out for you in the kitchen, by the way. Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

Toy left him alone. He sat down on the bed and opened his suitcase.

The

badly packed clothes smelled of prison detergent, and he didn't want to take them

out. Instead he dug down to the bottom of the case until his hands found his razor

and shaving foam. Then he undressed, slung his stale clothes on the floor, and went

Page 242

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

into the bathroom.

It was spacious, mirrored, and seductively lit. Freshly laundered towels

hung on a heated rack. There was a shower as well as a bath and a bidet: an

embarrassment of waterworks. Whatever else happened to him here, he'd be clean. He

switched on the mirror light and set the shaving implements down on the glass shelf

above the sink. He needn't have bothered with his search. Toy, or perhaps Luther,

had laid a complete shaving kit out for him; razor, preshave, foam, cologne. All

unopened, pristine: waiting for him. He looked at himself in the mirror-that

intimate self-scrutiny which was expected of women but which men seldom practiced

except in locked bathrooms. The anxieties of the day showed on his face: his skin

was anemic, and the bags under his eyes full. Like a man searching for some

treasure, he plundered his face for clues. Was his past written here, he wondered,

in all its grubby detail; etched, perhaps, too deeply to be erased?

He needed some sun, no doubt of that, and decent exercise out in the open

air. From tomorrow, he thought, a new regime. He'd run every day till he was so fit

he was unrecognizable. Get himself to a proper dentist too. His gums bled worryingly

often, and in one or two places they were receding from the tooth. He was proud of

his teeth: they were even and strong, like his mother's. He tried his smile on the

mirror, but it had lost some of its former sparkle. He'd have to exercise that too.

He was in the big wide world again; and maybe in time there'd be women to woo with

that smile.

His surveillance shifted from face to body. A wedge of fat was sitting on

the muscle of his abdomen: he was easily a stone overweight. He'd have to work at

that. Watch his diet, and keep the exercise up until he was back to the twelve stone

three he'd been when he first went to Wandsworth. The extra weight apart, he felt

quite good about himself. Maybe the warm light flattered him, but prison didn't seem

to have changed him radically. He still had all his hair; he wasn't scarred-except

for the tattoos, and a small crescent to the left of his mouth; he wasn't doped up

to the eyeballs. Maybe he was a survivor after all.

His hand had crept to his groin as he perused himself, and he'd idly teased

himself semierect. He hadn't been thinking of Charmaine. If there was any lust in

his arousal it was narcissistic. Many of the cons he'd lived with had found it easy

to slake their sexual thirst with their cellmates, but Marty had never been

comfortable with the idea. Not simply out of distaste for the acts-though he felt

that acutely-but because that unnaturalness was forced upon him. It was just another

way that prison humiliated a man. Instead, he'd locked his sexuality away, and used

his cock for pissing and little else. Now, toying with it like a vain adolescent, he

wondered if he could still use the damn thing.

He ran the shower lukewarm and stepped in, slicking himself down from head

to foot with lemon-scented soap. In a day of pleasures this was perhaps the best.

The water was stimulating, like standing in a spring rain. His body began to wake.

Yes, that was it, he thought: I've been dead, and I'm coming back to life. He'd been

buried in the asshole of the world, a hole so deep he thought he'd never scramble

out of it, but he had, damn it. He was out. He rinsed, and then indulged himself

with a repeat of the ritual, this time running the water considerably hotter and

harder. The bathroom filled with steam and the slap of the water on the shower

tiles.

When he stepped out and turned the flow off, his head buzzed with heat,

whisky and fatigue. He moved to the mirror and cleared an oval in the condensation

with the ball of his fist. The water had brought new color to his cheeks. His hair

was plastered to his head like a brown-blond skullcap. He'd let it grow, he thought,

as long as Whitehead didn't object; get it styled perhaps. But there was more

pressing business now; the removal of the condemned mustache. He wasn't particularly

hirsute. The mustache had taken him several weeks to grow, and he'd had to tolerate

the usual run of witless remarks while he was doing it. But if the boss man wanted

him barefaced, who was he to argue? Whitehead's opinion on the matter had sounded

more like an order than a suggestion.

Despite the well-supplied cabinet in the bathroom (everything from aspirin

to crab-killing preparations), there were no scissors, and he had to soap the hairs

thoroughly to soften them and then go at them directly with the razor. The blade

protested, and so did his skin, but stroke by stroke his upper lip came back into

view, the hard-earned mustache hitting the sink in a slop of suds, only to be sucked

away down the drain. It took him half an hour to do the job to his satisfaction. He

nicked himself in two or three places, and sealed the cuts as best he could with

Page 243

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

spit.

By the time he'd finished the steam had cleared from the bathroom, and only

patches of mist marred his reflection. He looked at his face in the mirror. His

naked upper lip was pink and vulnerable, and the groove at its center curiously

overperfect in its formation, but his sudden nudity wasn't such a bad sight.

Content, he sluiced the remains of his mustache from the sides of the sink,

wrapped a towel about his middle and sauntered back into the bedroom. In the

centrally heated warmth of the house, he was practically dry: no need for toweling.

Weariness and hunger fought in him as he sat on the edge of the bed. There was food

downstairs for him, or so Toy had said. Well, maybe he'd just lie back on this

virginal sheet, head on the scented pillow, and close his eyes for half an hour,

then get up and wander down to eat supper. He slung off the towel and lay on the

bed, half-pulling the duvet over him, and in the act of doing so, fell asleep. There

were no dreams; or if there were he slept too securely to remember them.

It was morning in moments.

13

If he had forgotten the geography of the house from his brief tour the previous

night, it took only a sense of smell to lead him back to the kitchen. Bacon was

frying, fresh coffee was being perked. At the stove stood a redhaired woman. She

turned from her work and nodded.

"You must be Martin," she said; her voice carried a faint Irish

inflection.

"You're up late."

He looked at the clock on the wall. It was a few minutes past seven.

"You've got a fine morning to start."

The back door was open; he crossed the expanse of the kitchen to survey the

day. It was fine; another clear sky. Frost sugared the lawn. In the misted distance

he could see what looked like tennis courts, and beyond them, a stand of trees.

"I'm Pearl, by the way," the woman announced. "I cook for Mr. Whitehead.

Hungry, are you?"

"I am now I'm down here."

"We believe in breakfast here. Something to set you up for the day." She was

busy transferring bacon from the frying pan on the stove to the oven. The work

surface beside the hob was littered with food: tomatoes, sausages, slices of black

pudding. "There's coffee on the side there. Help yourself."

The percolator burped and fizzed as he poured himself a mug of coffee, the

same dark but fragrant roast he'd tasted the night before.

"You'll have to get used to using the kitchen when I'm not here. I don't live in. I just come and go."

"Who cooks for Mr. Whitehead when you're away?"

"He likes to do it himself on occasion. But you'll have to put in a hand."

"I can scarcely boil water."

"You'll learn."

She turned to look at him, egg in hand. She was older than he'd at first thought:

maybe fifty.

"Don't fret yourself about it," she said. "How hungry?"

"Ravenous."

"I left a cold spread out last night."

"I fell asleep."

She broke one egg into the frying pan, and then a second, as she said, "Mr.

Whitehead doesn't have fancy tastes, except for his strawberries. He won't be

expecting soufflés, don't worry. Most of the stuff's in the freezer next door: all

you have to do is unwrap it and put it in the microwave."

Marty scanned the kitchen, taking in all the equipment: food processor,

microwave oven, electric carving knife. Behind him, mounted on the wall, was a row

of television screens. He hadn't noticed them last night. Before he could inquire

about them, however, Pearl was offering further gastronomic details.

"He often gets

hungry in the middle of the night, or so Nick used to say. He keeps such funny

hours, you see."

"Who's Nick?"

"Your predecessor. He left just before Christmas. I quite liked him; but Bill said he got a little light-fingered."

"I see."

She shrugged. "Still, you can't tell, can you? I mean, he-" She halted in

Page 244

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

midsentence, quietly cursing her tongue, and covered her embarrassment by coaxing

the eggs out of the pan and onto the plate to join the food she'd already assembled

there. Marty finished her thought out loud for her.

"He didn't look like a thief; is that what you were going to say?"

"I didn't mean it like that," she insisted, transferring the plate from

stove to table. "Careful, the plate's hot." Her face had gone the color of her hair.

"It's all right," Marty told her.

"I liked Nick," she reiterated. "Really I did. I've broken one of the eggs.

I'm sorry."

Marty looked down at the full plate. One of the yolks had indeed

broken and

was pooling around a fried tomato.

"Looks fine to me," he said with genuine appetite, and set to eating.
Pearl

refilled his mug, found a cup for herself, filled that, and sat down with him.

"Bill speaks very highly of you," she said.

"I wasn't sure he'd taken to me at first."

"Oh, yes," she said, "very much. Partly because of your boxing, of course.

He used to be a professional boxer himself."

"Really?"

"I thought he'd have told you. This is thirty years ago. Before he worked

for Mr. Whitehead. You want some toast?"

"If there's some going."

She got up and cut two slices of white bread, then slipped them into the

toaster. She hesitated a moment before returning to the table. "I really am sorry,"

she said.

"About the egg?"

"About mentioning Nick and thieving-"

"I asked," Marty replied. "Besides, you've every right to be cautious. I'm

an ex-con. Not even ex, really. I could go back if I put a foot wrong"-
he loathed

saying this, as if the mere speaking of the words made the possibility
more

real-"but I'm not going to let Mr. Toy down. Or myself. OK?"

She nodded, clearly relieved that nothing had been soured between
them, and

sat down again to finish her coffee. "You're not like Nick," she said, "I
can tell

that already."

"Was he odd?" Marty said. "Glass eye or something?"

"Well, he wasn't-" She seemed to regret this fresh line of conversation

before it was begun. "It's no matter," she said, dismissing it.

"No. Go on."

"Well, for what it's worth, I think he had debts."

Marty tried not to register anything but the mildest interest. But
something

must have showed in his eyes, a flicker of panic perhaps. Pearl
frowned.

"What sort of debts?" he asked, lightly.

The toast popped up, claiming Pearl's attention. She crossed to fetch
the

slices and brought them back to the table. "Excuse fingers," she said.

"Thanks."

"I don't know how much he owed."

"No, I don't mean how big, I meant . . . where did they come from?"

Was he making this sound like an idle inquiry, he wondered, or was she able

to see from the way he clutched his fork, or his sudden loss of appetite, that this

was a significant question? He had to ask it, however it might seem to her. She

thought for a moment before answering. When she did, there was something of the

street-corner gossip in her slightly lowered voice; whatever came next was to be a

secret between them.

'He used to come down here at all times of the day and make telephone calls. He told

me he was calling people in the business-he was a stuntman, you see, or had been-but

I soon cottoned on that he was making bets. It's my guess that's where the debts

came from. Gambling."

Somehow Marty had known the answer before it came. It begged, of course,

another question: was it just coincidence that Whitehead had employed two

bodyguards, both, at some point in their lives, gamblers? Both-it now

appeared-thieves for their hobby? Toy had never shown much interest in that aspect

of Marty's life. But then maybe all the salient facts were in the file that

Somervale had always carried: the psychologist's reports, the trial transcripts,

everything Toy would ever need to know about the compulsion that had driven Marty to

theft. He tried to shrug off the discomfort he felt about all this. What the hell

Page 245

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

did it matter? It was old news; he was healthy now.

"You finished with your plate?"

"Yes, thanks."

"More coffee?"

"I'll get it."

Pearl took the plate from in front of Marty, scraped the uneaten food onto a

second plate-"For the birds," she said-and started to load plates, cutlery and pans

alike into the dishwasher. Marty refilled his mug and watched her at work. She was

an attractive woman; middle-age suited her.

"How many staff does Whitehead have altogether?"

"Mr. Whitehead," she said, gently correcting him. "Staff? Well, there's me.

I come and go like I said. And there's Mr. Toy, of course."

"He doesn't live here either, right?"

"He stays overnight when they have conferences here."

"Is that regular?"

"Oh, yes. There's a lot of meetings go on in the house. People in and out

all the time. That's why Mr. Whitehead's so security conscious."

"Does he ever go down to London?"

"Not now," she said. "He used to jet around quite a bit. Off to New York or

Hamburg or some such place. But not now. Now he just stays here all year round and

makes the rest of the world come to him. Where was I?"

"Staff."

"Oh, yes. The place used to swarm with people. Security staff; servants;

upstairs maids. But then he went through a very suspicious patch. Thought one of

them might poison him or murder him in his bath. So he sacked them all: just like

that. Said he was happier with just a few of us: the ones he trusted. That way he

wasn't surrounded by people he didn't know."

"He doesn't know me."

"Maybe not yet. But he's canny: like nobody I've ever met."

The telephone rang. She picked it up. He knew it must be Whitehead on the

other end. Pearl looked caught in the act.

"Oh . . . yes. It's my fault. I kept him talking. Right away." The receiver was quickly replaced. "Mr. Whitehead's waiting for you. You'd better hurry. He's with the dogs."

14

The kennels were located behind a group of outhouses-once stables, perhaps-two

hundred yards to the back of the main house. A sprawling collection of breeze-block

sheds and wire-mesh enclosures, they had been built simply to fulfill their

function, with no thought for architectural felicities; they were an eyesore.

It was chilly out in the open air, and crossing the crusty grass toward the

kennels Marty had rapidly regretted his shirtsleeves. But there'd been an urgency in

Pearl's voice as she sent him on his way, and he didn't want to leave Whitehead-no,

he must learn to think of the man as Mr. Whitehead-waiting longer than he already

had. As it was, the great man seemed unruffled by his late arrival.

"I thought we'd take a look at the dogs this morning. Then maybe we'll make

a tour of the grounds, yes?"

"Yes, Sir."

He was dressed in a heavy black coat, the thick fur collar of which

cradled

his head.

"You like dogs?"

"You asking me honestly, sir?"

"Of course."

"Not much."

"Was your mother bitten, or were you?" There was a twitch of a smile in the

bloodshot eyes.

"Neither of us that I can remember, sir."

Whitehead grunted. "Well you're about to meet the tribe, Strauss, whether

you like them or not. It's important they get to recognize you. They're trained to

tear intruders apart. We don't want them making any mistakes."

A figure had emerged from one of the larger sheds, carrying a choke chain.

It took two glances for Marty to work out whether the newcomer was male or female.

The cropped hair, the shabby anorak and the boots all suggested masculinity; but

there was something in the molding of the face that betrayed the illusion.

"This is Lillian. She looks after the dogs."

The woman nodded a greeting without even glancing at Marty.

At her appearance several dogs-large, shaggy Alsations-had emerged from the

kennels into the concrete run, and were sniffing at her through the wire, whining a

welcome. She shushed them unsuccessfully; the welcome escalated into barks, and now

one or two were standing on their hind legs, man-height against the mesh, their

tails wagging furiously. The din worsened.

"Be quiet," she snapped across to them, and almost all were chastened into

silence. One male, however, larger than the rest, still stood against the wire,

demanding attention, until Lillian drew off her leather glove and put her fingers

through the mesh to scratch his deep-furred throat.

"Martin here has taken over in Nick's stead," said Whitehead. "He'll be here

all the time from now on. I thought he should meet the dogs, and have the dogs meet

him."

"Makes sense," Lillian replied, without enthusiasm.

"How many are there?" Marty inquired.

"Fully grown? Nine. Five males, four females. This is Saul," she said,

speaking of the dog she was still stroking. "He's the oldest, and the biggest. The

male over in the corner is Job. He's one of Saul's sons. He's not too well at the

moment."

Job had half-lain down in the corner of the enclosure and was licking his

testicles with some enthusiasm. He seemed to know he had become the center of

conversation, because he looked up from his toilet for a moment. In the look he gave

them there was everything Marty hated about the species: the threat, the shiftiness,

the barely subdued resentment of its masters.

"The bitches are over there-"

There were two dogs trotting up and down the length of the enclosure.

"-the lighter one's Dido, and the darker's Zoe."

It was odd to hear these brutes called by such names; it seemed wholly

inappropriate. And surely they resented the woman's christenings; mocked her,

probably, behind her back.

"Come over here," Lillian said, summoning Marty as she might one of her

pack. Like them, he came.

"Said," she said to the animal behind the wire, "this is a friend. Come

closer," she told Marty, "he can't smell you from over there."

The dog had dropped down onto all fours. Marty approached the wire cautiously.

"Don't be afraid. Go right up to him. Let him get a good sniff of you."

"They don't like fear," said Whitehead. "Isn't that right, Lillian?"

"That's right. If they smell it on you, they know they've got you. Then they're merciless. You have to stand up to them."

Marty approached the dog. It looked up at him testily: he stared back.

"Don't try and outstare him," Lillian advised. "It makes the dog aggressive.

Just let him get your scent, so he knows you."

Saul sniffed at Marty's legs and crotch through the mesh, much to Marty's

discomfort. Then, apparently satisfied, he wandered away.

"Good enough," said Lillian. "Next time, no wire. And in a while, you'll be

handling him." She was taking some pleasure in Marty's unease, he was sure of it.

But he said nothing; just let her lead the way into the largest of the sheds.

"Now you must meet Bella," she said.

Inside the kennels the smell of disinfectant, stale urine and dogs was overpowering. Lillian's entrance was greeted with another sustained round of barking

and wire-pawing. The shed had a walkway down the center, with cages off to the right

and left. Two of these held a single dog, both bitches, one considerably smaller

than the other. Lillian rolled off the details as they passed each cage-the dogs'

names, and their place on the incestuous family tree. Marty attended to all she was

saying, and immediately forgot it again. His mind was otherwise occupied. It wasn't

just the intimate presence of the dogs that unnerved him, but the suffocating

familiarity of this interior. The walkway; the cells with their concrete floors,

their blankets, their bare bulbs: it was like home from home. And now he began to

see the dogs in a new light; saw another meaning in Job's baleful glance as he

looked up from his ablutions; understood, better than Lillian or Whitehead ever

could, how these prisoners must view him and his species.

He stopped to look into one of the cages: not out of any particular

interest, but to focus on something other than the anxiety he felt in this

Page 247

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

claustrophobic hut.

"What's this one called?" he asked.

The, dog in the cage was at the door; another sizable male, though not

on

the scale of Saul.

"That's Laurousse," Lillian replied.

The dog looked friendlier than the others, and Marty overcame his nerves and

went down on his haunches in the narrow corridor, extending a tentative hand toward

the cage.

"He'll be fine with you," she said.

Marty put his fingers to the mesh. Laurousse sniffed them inquisitively; his

nose was damp and cold.

"Good dog," Marty said. "Laurousse."

The dog began to wag its tail, happy to be named by this sweating stranger.

"Good dog."

Down here, closer to the blankets and the straw, the smell of excrement and

fur was even stronger. But the dog was delighted that Marty had come down to its

level, and was attempting to lick his fingers through the wire. Marty felt the fear

in him dispelled by the dog's enthusiasm: far from meaning him harm, it showed

unalloyed pleasure.

Only now did he become aware of Whitehead's scrutiny. The old man

was

standing a few feet off to his left, his bulk entirely blocking the narrow passage

between the cages, watching intently. Marty stood up self-consciously, leaving the

dog to whine and wag below him, and followed Lillian further down the line of cages.

The dog-keeper was singing the praises of another member of the tribe. Marty tuned

in to her conversation:

"-and this is Bella," she announced. Her voice had softened; there was a

dreamy quality in it that he hadn't caught before. When Marty reached the cage into

which she was pointing, he saw why.

Bella half-lay and half-sat in the mesh shadows at the end of her cage,

arranged like a black-snouted Madonna on a bed of blankets and straw, with blind

pups suckling at her teats. Setting eyes on her, Marty's reservations about the dogs

evaporated.

"Six pups," Lillian announced as proudly as if they were her own, "all strong and healthy."

More than strong and healthy, they were beautiful; fat balls of contentment

nestling against each other in the luxury of their mother's lap. It seemed

inconceivable that creatures so vulnerable could grow into iron-gray lords like

Saul, or suspicious rebels like Job.

Bella, sensing a newcomer among her congregation, pricked up her ears. Her

head was superbly proportioned, tones of sable and gold mingling in her coat to

glamorous effect, her brown eyes vigilant but soft in the half-light. She was so

finished; so completely herself. The only response to her presence-and one that

Marty willingly granted-was awe.

Lillian peered though the wire, introducing Marty to this mother of mothers.

"This is Mr. Strauss, Bella," she said. "You'll see him now and again; he's

a friend."

There was no baby-talk condescension in Lillian's voice. She spoke to the

dog as to an equal, and despite Marty's initial uncertainty about the woman, he

found himself warming to her. Love wasn't an easy thing to come by, he knew that to

his cost. Whatever shape it came in, it made sense to respect it. Lillian loved this

dog-her grace, her dignity. It was a love he could approve of, if not entirely

understand.

Bella sniffed the air, and seemed satisfied that she had the measure of

Marty. Lillian reluctantly turned from the cage to Strauss.

"She might even take to you, given time. She's a great seductress, you know.

A great seductress."

Behind them, Whitehead grunted at this sentimental nonsense.

"Shall we look over the grounds?" he suggested impatiently. "I think we're

done here."

"Come back when you've settled in," Lillian said; her manner had defrosted

noticeably since Marty had shown some appreciation of her charges, "and I'll put

them through their paces for you."

"Thanks. I will."

"I wanted you to see the dogs," Whitehead said as they left the enclosures

Page 248

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

behind, and started at a brisk pace across the lawn to the perimeter fence. That was

only part of the reason for the visit, though; Marty knew that damn well. Whitehead

had intended the experience as a salutary reminder of what Marty had left behind

him. There, but for the grace of Joseph Whitehead, he would go again.

Well, the

lesson was learned. He'd jump through hoops of fire for the old man rather than go

back into the custody of corridors and cells. There wasn't even a Bella there; no

sublime and secret mother locked away in the heart of Wandsworth. Just lost men like

himself.

The day was warming: the sun was up, a pale lemon balloon drifting above the

rookery, and the frost was melting from the lawns. For the first time Marty began to

get some sense of the scale of the estate. Distances opened up to either side of

them: he could see water, a lake, or river perhaps, shining beyond a bank of trees.

On the west side of the house there were rows of cypresses, suggesting walkways,

fountains perhaps; to the other side, a banked garden surrounded by a low stone

wall. It would take him weeks to get the layout of the place.

They had reached the double fence that ran right around the estate. A good

ten feet high, both fences were topped by sharpened steel struts that curved out

toward the would-be intruder. These were in turn crowned with spirals of barbed

wire. The whole construction hummed, almost imperceptibly, with an

electric charge.

Whitehead regarded it with evident satisfaction.

"Impressive, eh?"

Marty nodded. Again, the sight woke echoes.

"It offers a measure of security," Whitehead said.

He turned left at the fence, and began to walk its length, the conversation-if that it could be called-coming from him in the form of a series of

non sequiturs, as if he were too impatient with the elliptical structure of normal

exchanges to bear with it. He simply threw statements, or clusters of remarks, down,

and expected Marty to make whatever sense he could of them.

"It's not a perfect system: fences, dogs, cameras. You saw the screens in

the kitchen?"

"Yes.

"I've got the same upstairs. The cameras offer total surveillance day and

night." He jerked a thumb up at one of the camera's floodlights mounted beside them.

There was one set on every tenth upright. They swiveled back and forth slowly, like

the heads of mechanical birds.

"Luther'll show you how to run through them in sequence. Cost a small

fortune to install, and I'm not sure it's more than cosmetic. These people aren't

fools."

"You've had break-ins?"

"Not here. At the London house it used to happen all the time. Of course,

that was when I was more visible. The unrepentant tycoon. Evangeline and me in every

scandal sheet. The open sewer of Fleet Street; it never fails to appall me."

"I thought you owned a newspaper?"

"Been reading up on me?"

"Not exactly; I-"

"Don't believe the biographies, or the gossip columns, or even Who's Who.

They lie. I lie"-he finished the declension, entertained by his own cynicism-"he,

she, or it lies. Scribblers. Dirt peddlers. Contemptible, the lot of them."

Was that what he was keeping out with these lethal fences: dirt peddlers? A

fortress against a tide of scandal and shit? If so, it was an elaborate lay to go

about it. Marty wondered if this wasn't simply monstrous egotism. Was the hemisphere

that interested in the private life of Joseph Whitehead?

"What are you thinking, Mr. Strauss?"

"About the fences," Marty lied, proving Whitehead's earlier point.

"No, Strauss," Whitehead corrected him. "You're thinking: what have I got

myself into, locked up with a lunatic?"

Marty sensed any further denial would sound like guilt. He said nothing.

"Isn't that the conventional wisdom where I'm concerned? The failing plutocrat, festering in solitude. Don't they say that about me?"

"Something like that," Marty finally replied.

"And still you came."

"Yes."

"Of course you came. You thought that however offbeat I am, nothing could be

as bad as another stretch behind locked doors, isn't that right? And you wanted out.

Page 249

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

At any cost. You were desperate."

"Of course I wanted out. Anybody would."

"I'm glad you admit to that. Because your wanting gives me considerable

power over you, don't you think? You daren't cheat me. You must cleave to me the way

the dogs cleave to Lillian, not because she represents their next meal but because

she's their world. You must make me your world, Mr. Strauss; my preservation, my

sanity, my smallest comfort must be uppermost in your mind every waking moment. If

it is, I promise you freedoms you never dreamed of experiencing. The kind of

freedoms that are only in the gift of very wealthy men. If not, I will put you back

in prison with your record book irredeemably spoiled. Understand me?"

"I understand."

Whitehead nodded.

"Come then," he said. "Walk beside me."

He turned and walked on. The fence swung around behind the back of the woods

at this point, and rather than plunging into the undergrowth Whitehead suggested

they truncate their journey by heading toward the pool. "One tree looks much like

the next to me," he commented. "You can come here and trudge around to your heart's

content later on." They skirted the edge of the woods long enough for Marty to get

an impression of their density, however. The trees hadn't been systematically

planted; this was no regimented Forestry Commission reserve. They stood close to

each other, their limbs intertwined, a mixture of deciduous varieties

and pines all

fighting for growing space. Only occasionally, where an oak or a lime stood

bare-branched this early in the year, did light bless the undergrowth. He promised

himself a return here before spring prettified it.

Whitehead summoned Marty's thoughts back into focus.

"From now on I expect you to be within summoning distance most of the time.

I don't want you with me every moment of the day . . . just need you in the

vicinity. On occasion, and only with my permission, you'll be permitted to leave on

your own. You can drive?"

"Yes."

"Well, there's no shortage of cars, so we'll sort something out for you.

This isn't strictly within the guidelines set out by the parole board. Their

recommendation was that you remain, as it were, in custody here for six probationary

months. But I frankly see no reason to prevent you visiting your loved ones-at least

when there are other people around to look after my welfare."

"Thank you. I appreciate it."

"I'm afraid I can't allow you any time just at the moment. Your presence

here is vital."

"Problems?"

"My life is constantly threatened, Strauss. I, or rather my offices, receive

hate mail all the time. The difficulty is in separating the crank who spends his

time writing filth to public figures from the genuine assassin."

"Why should anyone want to assassinate you?"

"I'm one of the wealthiest men outside America. I own companies that employ

tens of thousands of people; I own tracts of land so large I could not walk them in

the years remaining to me if I began now; I own ships, art, horseflesh. It's easy to

make an icon of me. To think that if I and my life were brought down there'd be

peace on earth and goodwill to men."

"I see."

"Sweet dreams," he said bitterly.

The pace of their march had begun to slow. The great man's breath was rather

shorter now than it had been half an hour before. Listening to him talk it was easy

to forget his advanced years. His opinions had all the absolutism of youth. No room

here for the mellowness of advancing years; for ambiguity or doubt.

"I think it's time we headed back," he said.

The monologue had finally lapsed, and Marty had no taste for further talk.

No energy either. Whitehead's style-with its unsignaled swerves and bends-had

exhausted him. He'd have to get used to the pose of the attentive listener: find a

face to use when these lectures began, and put it on. Learn to nod knowingly in the

right places, to murmur platitudes at the appropriate breaks in the flow. It would

take a while, but he'd get the trick of handling Whitehead in time.

"This is my fortress, Mr. Strauss," the old man announced as they approached

the house. It didn't look particularly garrisoned: the brick was too warm to be

stern. "Its sole function is to keep me from harm."

Page 250

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"Like me."

"Like you, Mr. Strauss."

Behind the house, one of the dogs had started barking. The solo rapidly

became a chorus.

"Feeding time," Whitehead said.

It took several weeks' living on the estate for Marty to understand fully the rhythm

of the Whitehead household. Like the benign dictatorship it was, the shape of each

day was defined absolutely by Whitehead's plans and whims. As the old man had told

Marty that first day, the house was a shrine to him; his worshipers came daily to

touch the hem of his opinion. Some of their faces he recognized: captains of

industry; two or three government ministers (one of whom had recently left office in

disgrace; was he coming here, Marty wondered, asking for forgiveness or

retribution?); pundits, guardians of public morality-many people Marty knew by sight

but couldn't name, even more he didn't know at all. He was introduced to none of

them.

Once or twice a week he might be asked to remain in the room while the

meetings were held, but more often than not he was required only to be within

hailing distance. Wherever he was, he was invisible as far as most of the guests

were concerned: ignored, treated at best as part of the furniture. At first it was

irritating; everyone in the house had a name but him, it seemed. As time passed,

however, he grew to be glad of his anonymity. He wasn't required to give an opinion

on everything, so he could let his mind drift with no danger of being called into

the conversation. It was good too to be dislocated from the concerns of these

almighty people: their lies seemed, he thought, fraught and artificial. He saw in

many of their faces looks he recognized from his years in Wandsworth: the constant

fretting over minor gibes, over their place in the hierarchy. The rules might be

more civil in this circle than in Wandsworth; but the struggles, he began to

understand, were fundamentally the same. All power games of one kind or another. He

was pleased to have no part in them.

Besides, his mind had more important issues to mull over. For one thing,

there was Charmaine. More out of curiosity than passion, perhaps, he had begun to

think about her a good deal. He found himself wondering how her body looked seven

years on. Did she still shave the thin line of hair that ran down from her navel to

her pubes; did her fresh sweat still smell so pungent? He wondered too if she still

loved love the way she had. She had shown more unreserved appetite for the physical

act than any woman he'd known; it was one of the reasons he'd married her. Was it

still so? And if it was, with whom did she slake her thirst? He turned these and a

dozen other questions about her over and over in his head, and promised himself that

at the first opportunity he'd go and see her.

The weeks saw his physique improve. The strict regime of exercise he'd set

for himself that first night began as a torment, but after a few days of punished

and complaining muscles the exertion began to bear fruit. He got up at five-thirty

each morning and took an hour-long run around the grounds. After a week of following

the same circuit he altered the route, which allowed him to explore the estate at

the same time as exercising. There was a great deal to see. Spring hadn't arrived in

force yet, but there were stirrings. Crocuses were beginning to show themselves, as

were the spears of daffodils. On the trees, fat buds were starting to split; leaves

were unfurling. It had taken him almost a week to cover the estate fully, and to

work out the relation of one part of it to another; now he more or less had a grasp

of the arrangement. He knew the lake, the dovecote, the swimming pool, the tennis

courts, the kennels, the woods and the gardens. One morning, when the sky was

exceptionally clear, he had circuited the entire grounds, hugging the fence all the

way around the estate even when it threaded its way along the back of the woods. He

now reckoned he had as thorough a knowledge of the place as anyone, including its

owner.

It was a joy; not just the exploration, and the freedom of running miles

without someone looking over your shoulder all the time, but the reacquaintance with

a dozen natural spectacles. He loved being up to watch the sun rise, and it was

almost as though he was running to meet it, as though dawn was for him and him

alone, a promise of light and warmth and life to come.

He soon lost the ring of flab around his middle; the divide of his

abdominals showed again: the washboard stomach he'd always been so proud of as a

Page 251

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

younger man, and thought he'd lost forever. Muscles he'd forgotten he had came back

into play, at first to make their presence felt in aching, then to simply live a

glowing, ruddy life. He was sweating out years of frustration and showering it away,

and he was lighter for it. He was aware, once more, of his body as a system, its

parts correspondents, its health dependent on balance and respectful usage.

If Whitehead noted any change in his manner or physique, no comment was

made. But Toy, on one of his trips up to the house from London, immediately

registered the change in him. Marty noted an alteration in Toy too, but for the

worse. It wasn't plausible to comment on how weary he looked Marty felt their

relationship wouldn't yet allow for such familiarity. He just hoped Toy wasn't

suffering from something serious. The sudden wasting of his wide face suggested a

devouring somewhere in the man's innards. The nimbleness in his step, which Marty

put down to Toy's Years in the ring, had also gone.

There were other mysteries here, besides Toy's decline. For one thing, there

was the collection: the works of the great masters that lined the corridors of the

sanctuary. They were neglected. Nobody had dusted their surfaces in months, perhaps

years, and in addition to the yellowing varnish that dimmed their fineness they were

further spoiled by a layer of grime. Marty had never had much taste for art, but

given time to look at these pictures, he found his appetite for it good. Many of

them, the portraits and the religious works, he didn't really like: they weren't of

people he knew or events he understood. But in a small hallway on the first floor

that led to the extension that had been Evangeline's suite, and was now the sauna

and solarium, he found two paintings that caught his imagination. They were both

landscapes, by the same anonymous hand, and to judge by their poky location they

were not great works. But their curious amalgam of real scenery-trees and winding

roads under blue and yellow skies-with totally fanciful details-a dragon with

speckled wings devouring a man on that road; a flight of women levitating above the

forest; a distant city, burning-this marriage of real and unreal was so persuasively

painted that Marty found himself going back and back again to these two haunted

canvases, finding more fantastical detail hidden in thicket or heat-haze each time

he went.

The paintings weren't the only things that whetted his curiosity. The upper

floor of the main house, where Whitehead had a suite of rooms, was entirely

out-of-bounds to him, and he was more than once tempted to slip up when he knew the

old man was otherwise engaged, to nose around the forbidden territory. He suspected

Whitehead used the top story as a vantage point from which to spy on his acolytes'

comings and goings. That went some way to explaining the other mystery: the sense,

he had, running his circuits, that he was being watched. But he resisted the

temptation to investigate. It was perhaps more than his job was worth.

When he wasn't working he spent much of his time in the library. There, if

he felt curious about the outside world, were current issues of Time magazine, The

Washington Post, The Times, and several other journals-Le Monde, Frankfurter

Algemeine Zeitung, The New York Times, which Luther brought in. He would flick

through them looking for tidbits, sometimes taking them down to the sauna and

reading them there. When he tired of newspapers, there were thousands of books to

choose from, not, to his delight, all intimidating tomes. There were plenty of

those, the assembled classics of world literature, but beside them on the shelves

were tattered, well-thumbed paperback editions of science fiction books, their

covers lurid, the copy on them paradigms of excess. Marty began to read them,

picking those with the most suggestive covers first. There was also the video. Toy

had supplied him with a dozen tapes of boxing highlights, which Marty was

systematically viewing, rerunning favorite victories to his heart's content. He

could sit all evening watching the matches, awed by the economy and the grace of the

great fighters. Toy, ever thoughtful, had also supplied a couple of pornographic

tapes, handing them across to Marty with a conspiratorial smile and some comment

about not eating them all at once. The tapes were copies of storyless loops,

anonymous couples and trios who threw off their clothes in the first thirty seconds

and got down to the nitty-gritty inside a minute. Nothing sophisticated: but they

served a useful purpose, and, as Toy had obviously guessed, good air, exercise and

optimism were doing wonders for Marty's libido. There was going to come a time when

self-abuse in front of a video screen was not going to be satisfaction enough.

Increasingly, Marty dreamed of Charmaine: unambiguous dreams set

in the bedroom of

Number Twenty-six. Frustration gave him courage, and the next time he saw Toy he

asked to be allowed to go and see her. Toy promised to ask the boss about it, but

Page 252

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

nothing had come of it. In the meanwhile he had to be content with tapes and their

stage-managed gasps and grunts.

Systematically he began to put names to the faces that appeared most regularly at

the house; Whitehead's most trusted advisers. Toy, of course, was regularly in

evidence. There was also a lawyer called Ottaway, a thin, well-dressed man of forty

of so, whom Marty took a dislike to when he first overheard the man's conversation.

Ottaway spoke with that air of the legal fan-dancer, all tease and cover-ups, that

Marty had experienced first hand. It brought back sour memories.

There was another, called Curtsinger, a sober-suited individual with an

excruciating taste in ties and a worse one in colognes, who, though often in

Ottaway's company, seemed far more benign. He was one of the few who actually

acknowledged Marty's presence in a room-usually with a small, sharp nod. On one

occasion, celebrating some deal that had just been made, Curtsinger had slipped a

large cigar into the pocket of Marty's jacket; after that, Marty would have forgiven

him anything.

The third face that seemed to be in regular attendance at Whitehead's side

was the most enigmatic of the three: a swarthy troll of a man called Dwoskin. Here

was a Cassius to Toy's Brutus. His immaculate, pale gray suits, his meticulously

folded handkerchiefs, the precision of his every gesture-all spoke of an obsessive

whose rituals of tidiness were designed to counter the excess of his physicality.

But there was more: an undercurrent of danger about the man that Marty's years in

Wandsworth had taught him to be alive to. In fact, it was there in the others too.

Beneath Ottoway's frigid exterior and Curtsinger's sugar coating there were men who

were not-it was Somervale's phrase-entirely savory.

At first Marty dismissed the feeling as lower-class prejudice; a nobody

mistrusting the rich and influential on principle. But the more meetings he sat in

on, the more heated debates he was peripheral to, the more certain he

became that

there was in their dealings a scarcely concealed subtext of deceit, even of

criminality. Much of their talk he scarcely understood the subtleties of the stock

market were a closed book to him-but the civilized vocabulary could not completely

sanitize the essential drift. They were interested in the mechanics of deception:

how to manipulate the law and the market alike. Their exchanges were littered with

talk of tax avoidance, of selling between subsidiaries to inflate prices

artificially, of packaging placebos as panaceas. There was no apology implicit in

their stance; on the contrary the talk of illicit maneuvers, of political

alliances bought and sold, were positively applauded. And among these

manipulators, Whitehead was the kingpin. In his presence they were reverential. Out

of it, as they jockeyed for position closest to his feet, they were ruthless. He

could, and did, silence them with a half-lifted hand. His every word was venerated,

as if it fell from the lips of a Messiah. The charade amused Marty mightily: but

applying the rule of thumb he had learned in prison he knew that in order to earn

such devotion Whitehead must have sinned more deeply than his

admirers. In cunning,

he didn't doubt Whitehead's skills: he'd experienced his powers of persuasion

already. But as time went by the other question burned more brightly: was he also a

thief? And if not that, what was his crime?

16

Ease, she came to understand as she watched the runner from her window, is all; if

not all, it was the best part of what she delighted in, watching him. She didn't

know his name, though she could have inquired. It pleased her more to have him

anonymous, an angel dressed in a gray track suit, his breath a flux of mist at his

lips as he ran. She'd heard Pearl talk of the new bodyguard, and presumed this was

he. Did it really matter what his name was? Such details could only weigh down her

mythmaking.

It was a bad time for her, for many reasons, and on those defeated mornings,

sitting at her window having scarcely slept the night before, the sight of the angel

running across the lawn or flickering between the cypress trees was a sign she clung

to, a portent of better times to come. The regularity of his appearance was

something she came to count on, and when sleep was good and she missed him in the

morning, she felt an undeniable sense of loss for the rest of the day, and would

make a special point of keeping her rendezvous with him the next morning.

But she couldn't bring herself to leave the sunshine island, to cross so many dangerous reefs to get to where he was. Even to signal her existence in the

Page 253

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

house to him risked too much. She wondered if he was much of a detective. If he was,

perhaps he had discovered her presence in the house by some witty means: seen her

cigarette stubs in the kitchen sink, or smelled the scent of her in a room she had

left scant minutes before. Or perhaps angels, being divinities, needed no such

devices. Perhaps he simply knew, without the clues, that she was there, standing

behind the sky at a window, or pressed behind a locked door when he went whistling

down the corridor.

There was no use in reaching for him though, even if she could have found

the courage. What would she have to say to him? Nothing. And when, inevitably, he

sighed his irritation with her and turned his back, she would be lost in a

no-man's-land, isolated from the one place she felt secure, that sunshine island

that came to her out of a pure white cloud, that place that poppies bled to give

her.

"You've eaten nothing today," Pearl chided. It was a familiar complaint.

"You'll waste away."

"Leave me be, will you?"

"I'll have to tell him, you know."

"No, Pearl." Carys gave Pearl a pleading look. "Don't say anything. Please.

You know how he gets. I'll hate you if you say anything."

Pearl stood at the door with the tray, disapproval on her face. She wasn't

about to crumble at the appeal or at the blackmail. "Are you trying to starve

yourself again?" she asked unsympathetically.

"No. I just don't have much appetite, that's all."

Pearl shrugged.

"I don't understand you," she said. "Half the time you look suicidal.

Today-"

Carys smiled radiantly.

"It's your life," the woman said.

"Before you go, Pearl . . ."

"What?"

"Tell me about the runner."

Pearl looked bemused: it wasn't like the girl to show any interest in goings-on in the house. She stayed up here behind locked doors and dreamed. But

today she was insistent:

"The one who races himself every morning. In the track suit. Who is he?"

Where was the harm in telling her? Curiosity was a sign of health, and she

had too little of either.

"His name's Marty."

Marty. Carys tried the name in her head, and it fitted him fine. The angel's

name was Marty.

"Many what?"

"I can't remember."

Carys stood up. The smile had gone. She had that hard look that she got when

she really wanted something; the corners of her mouth pulled down. It was a look she

shared with Mr. Whitehead, and it intimidated Pearl. Carys knew that.

"You know my memory," Pearl said, apologetically. "I don't remember his

surname."

"Well, who is he?"

"Your father's bodyguard; he's taken over from Nick," Pearl replied.

"He's

an ex-prisoner, apparently. Robbery with violence."

"Really?"

"And rather lacking in social graces."

"Marty."

"Strauss," Pearl said, with a note of triumph. "Martin Strauss; that's it.

There: he was named, Carys thought. There was a primitive power in naming

someone. It gave you a handle on a person. Martin Strauss.

"Thank you," she said, genuinely pleased.

"Why do you want to know?"

"Just wondered who he was. People come and go."

"Well I think he's staying," Pearl said, and left the room. As she closed

the door Carys said:

"Does he have a middle name?"

But Pearl didn't hear.

It was strange, to think the runner had been a prisoner; still was a

Page 254

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

prisoner in a way, racing around and around the grounds, breathing in

clear air,

breathing out clouds, frowning as he ran. Perhaps he'd understand,
more than the old

man or Toy or Pearl, what it felt like to be on the sunshine island, and
not know

how to get off. Or worse, to know how, but never to dare it, for fear of
never

getting back to safety.

Now that she knew his name and his crimes, the romance of his
morning run

wasn't spoiled by the information. He still trailed glory; but now she
saw the

weight in his body when previously she'd seen only the lightness of his
step.

She decided, after an age of indecision, that watching was not going to
be

enough.

As Marty became fitter, so he demanded more of himself during his
morning run. The

circuit he made grew bigger, though by now he was covering the
larger distance in

the same time as he had the shorter. Sometimes, to add spice to the
exercise, he'd

plunge into the woods, careless of the undergrowth and the low
branches, his even

stride degenerating into an ad hoc collection of leaps and dashes. On
the other side

of the wood was the weir, and here, if he was in the mood, he might

halt for a few

minutes. There were herons here; three that he'd seen. It would soon be nesting time

and they would presumably pair off. He wondered what would happen to the third bird

then? Would it fly off in search of its own mate, or linger, thinking adulterous

thoughts? The weeks ahead would tell.

Some days, fascinated by the way Whitehead watched him from the top of the

house, he'd slow as he passed by, hoping to catch his face. But the watcher was too

careful to be caught.

And then one morning she was waiting at the dovecote for him as he made the long

curve back toward the house, and he knew at once that he'd been wrong about it being

the old man who'd been spying. This was the cautious observer at the upper window.

It was barely a quarter to seven in the morning, and still chilly. She'd been

waiting a while to judge by the flush on her cheeks and nose. Her eyes were shining

with cold.

He stopped, puffing out steam like a traction engine.

"Hello, Marty," she said.

"Hello."

"You don't know me."

"No."

She hugged her duffle coat more tightly around her. She was skinny, and

looked twenty at the most. Her eyes, so dark a brown they looked black at three

paces, were in him like claws. The ruddy face was wide, and without makeup. She

looked, he thought, hungry. He looked, she thought, ravenous.

"You're the one from upstairs," he ventured.

"Yes. You didn't mind me spying, did you?" she inquired, guilelessly

"Why should I?"

She extended a slim, gloveless hand to the stone of the dovecote.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" she said.

The building had never struck Marty as even interesting before, simply as a

landmark by which to pace his run.

"It's one of the biggest dovecotes in England," she said. "Did you know that?"

"No."

"Ever been in?"

He shook his head.

"It's a bizarre place," she said, and led the way around the barrel-shaped

building to the door. She had some difficulty pushing it open; the damp weather had

swelled the wood. Marty had to double up to follow her inside. It was even chillier

there than out, and he shivered, the sweat on his brow and sternum cooling now he'd

stopped running. But it was, as she had promised, bizarre: just a single round room

with a hole in the roof to allow the birds access and egress. The walls were lined

with square holes, nesting niches presumably, set in perfect rows-like tenement

windows-from floor to roof. All were empty. Judging by the absence of excrement or

feathers on the floor, the building had not been used in many years. Its

forsakenness gave it a melancholy air; its unique architecture rendered it useless

for any function but that for which it had been built. The girl had crossed the

impacted earth floor and was counting the nesting niches around from the door.

Page 255

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"Seventeen, eighteen-"

He watched her back. Her hair was unevenly cropped at the nape of her neck.

The coat she wore was too big for her: it wasn't even hers, he guessed.

Who was she?

Pearl's daughter?

She'd stopped counting. Now she put her hand into one of the holes, making a

little noise of discovery as her fingers located something. It was a hiding place,

he realized. She was about to trust him with a secret. She turned, and showed him

her treasure.

"I'd forgotten till I came back in," she said, "what I used to hide here."

It was a fossil, or rather the fragment of one, a spiral shell that had lain

at the bottom of some pre-Cambrian sea, before the world was green. In its flutes,

which she was stroking, motes of dust gathered. It crossed Marty's mind, watching

the intensity of her involvement with this piece of stone, that the girl was not

entirely sane. But the thought vanished when she looked up at him; her eyes were too

clear and too willful. If she had any insanity in her it was invited, a streak of

lunacy she was pleased to entertain. She grinned at him as if she'd known what he

was thinking: cunning and charm were mixed in her face in equal parts.

"Are there no doves, then?" he said.

"No, there haven't been, as long as I've been here."

"Not even a few?"

"If you just have a few they die in winter. If you keep a full dovecote they

all keep each other warm. But when there's only a handful they don't generate enough

heat, and they freeze to death."

He nodded. It seemed regrettable to leave the building empty.

"They should fill it up again."

"I don't know," she said. "I like it like this."

She slipped the fossil back into her hidey-hole.

"Now you know my special place," she said, and the cunning had gone; it was

all charm. He was entranced.

"I don't know your name."

"Carys," she said, then after a moment, added: "It's Welsh."

"Oh."

He couldn't help staring at her. She suddenly seemed embarrassed, and she

went back to the door quickly, ducking out into the open air. It had begun to rain,

a soft, mid-March drizzle. She put up the hood of her duffle coat; he put up his

track-suit hood.

"Maybe you'll show me the rest of the grounds?" he said, not certain

that

this was the appropriate question, but more certain that he didn't want this

conversation to end here without some possibility of them meeting again. She made a

noncommittal noise by way of reply. The corners of her mouth were tucked down.

"Tomorrow?" he said.

This time she didn't answer at all. Instead, she started to walk toward the

house. He tagged along, knowing their exchange would falter entirely if he didn't

find some way to keep it alive.

"It's strange being in the house with no one to talk to," he said.

That seemed to strike a chord.

"It's Papa's house," she said simply. "We just live in it."

Papa. So, she was his daughter. Now he recognized the old man's mouth on

her, those pinched-down corners that on him seemed so stoical, and on her, simply

sad.

"Don't tell anyone," she said.

He presumed she meant about their meeting, but he didn't press her. There

were more important questions to ask, if she didn't race away. He wanted to signal

his interest in her. But he could think of nothing to say. The sudden change in her

tempo, from gentle, elliptical conversation to this staccato, confounded him.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

She looked around at him, and beneath her hood she seemed almost to be in

mourning.

"I have to hurry," she said. "I'm wanted."

She picked up the pace of her step, signaling only in the hunch of her shoulders a desire to leave him behind. He obliged and slowed, leaving her to go

back to the house without a glance or a wave.

Rather than return to the kitchen, where he'd have to endure Pearl's banter

while he breakfasted, he started back across the field, giving the dovecote a wide

Page 256

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

berth, until he reached the perimeter fence, and punished himself with another

complete circuit. When he ran into the woods he found himself involuntarily scanning

the ground underfoot, looking for fossils.

17

Two days later, about eleven-thirty at night, he got a summons from

Whitehead.

"I'm in the study," he said on the phone. "I'd like a word with you."

The study, though it boasted half a dozen lamps, was almost in darkness.

Only the crane-necked lamp on the desk burned, and that threw its light onto a heap

of papers rather than into the room. Whitehead was sitting in the leather chair

beside the window. On the table beside him was a bottle of vodka and an almost empty

glass. He didn't turn when Marty knocked and entered, but simply addressed Marty

from his vantage point in front of the floodlit lawn.

"I think it's time I gave you more leash, Strauss," he said. "You've done a

fine job so far. I'm pleased."

"Thank you, sir."

"Bill Toy will be up here overnight tomorrow, and so will Luther, so this

might be an opportunity for you to go down to London."

It was eight weeks, almost to the day, since he'd arrived at the estate: and

here, at last, was a tentative signal that his place was secure.

"I've had Luther sort out a vehicle for you. Speak to him about it when he

arrives. And there's some money on the desk for you-"

Marty glanced across at the desk-top; there was indeed a pile of notes there.

"Go on, take it."

Marty's fingers fairly itched, but he kept control of his enthusiasm.

"It'll cover petrol and a night in the city."

Marty didn't count the notes; simply folded them and pocketed them.

"Thank you, sir."

"There's an address there too."

"Yes, sir."

"Take it. The shop belongs to a man called Halifax. He supplies me with

strawberries, out of season. Will you pick up my order, please?"

"Of course."

"That's the only errand I want you to run. As long as you're back by midmorning Saturday, the rest of the time's your own."

"Thank you."

Whitehead's hand reached out for the glass of vodka, and Marty thought he

was going to turn and look at him; he didn't. This interview was apparently over.

"Is that all, sir?"

"All? Yes, I think so. Don't you?"

It was many months since Whitehead had gone to bed sober. He'd started to use vodka

as a soporific when the night terrors began; at first just a glass or two to dull

the edge of his fear, then gradually increasing the dosage as, with time, his body

became immune to it. He took no pleasure in drunkenness. He loathed putting his

spinning head down on the pillow and hearing his thoughts whine in his ears. But he

feared the fear more.

Now, as he sat watching the lawn, a fox stepped across the threshold of the

floodlights, blanched by the brilliant illumination, and stared at the house. Its

stillness lent it perfection; its eyes, catching the light, gleamed in its pricked

head. It waited a moment only. Suddenly it seemed to sense danger-the dogs

perhaps-and it turned tail and was gone. Whitehead still watched the spot it had

disappeared from long after it had loped away, hoping against hope that it would

come back and share his solitude for a space. But it had other business in the

night.

There was a time when he'd been a fox: thin and sharp; a night wanderer. But

things had changed. Providence had been bountiful, dreams had come true; and the

fox, always a shape-changer, had grown fat and easy. The world had changed too: it

had become a geography of profit and loss. Distances had shrunk to the length of his

command. He had forgotten, with time, his previous life.

But of late he remembered it more and more. It came back in brilliant but

reproachful detail, when the events of the day before were a fog. But he knew in his

heart of hearts there was no way back to that blessed state.

Page 257

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

And forward from here? That was a journey into a hopeless place, where no

signpost would point him right or left-all directions being equal there-nor would

there be hill or tree or habitation to mark the way. Such a place. Such a terrible

place.

But he wouldn't be alone there. In that nowhere he would have a companion.

And when, in the fullness of time, he set his eyes on that land and its

tenant he would wish, oh Christ how he would wish, that he had stayed a fox.

III

The Last European

Anthony Breer, the Razor-Eater, returned to his tiny flat in the late afternoon,

made himself instant coffee in his favorite cup, then sat at the table in the

failing light and started to tie himself a noose. He'd known from early morning that

today was the day. No need to go down to the library; if, in time, they noticed his

absence and wrote to him demanding to know where he was, he wouldn't be answering.

Besides, the sky had looked as grubby as his sheets at dawn, and being a rational

man he'd thought: why bother to wash the sheets when the world's so dirty, and I'm

so dirty, and there's no chance of ever getting any of it clean? The best thing is

to put an end to this squalid existence once and for all.

He'd seen hanged people aplenty. Only photographs, of course, in a book he'd

stolen from work about war crimes, marked "Not for the open shelves. To be issued

only on request." The warning had really got his imagination working: here was a

book people weren't really meant to see. He'd slipped it into his bag unopened,

knowing from the very title-Soviet Documents on Nazi Atrocities-that this was a

volume almost as sweet in the anticipation as in the reading. But in that he'd been

wrong. Mouthwatering as that day had been, knowing that his bag contained this taboo

treasure that delight was nothing compared to the revelations of the book itself.

There were pictures of the burned-out ruins of Chekhov's cottage in Istra and others

of the desecration of the Tchaikovsky residence. But mostly-and more importantly-there were photographs of the dead. Some of them heaped in piles, others

lying in bloody snow, frozen solid. Children with their skulls broken open, people

lying in trenches, shot in the face, others with swastikas carved into their chests

and buttocks. But to the Razor-Eater's greedy eyes, the best photographs were of

people being hanged. There was one Breer looked at very often. It pictured a

handsome

young man being strung up from a makeshift gallows. The photographer had caught him

in his last moments, staring directly at the camera, a wan and beatific smile on his

face.

That was the look Breer wanted them to find on his face when they broke down

the door of this very room and found him suspended up here,

pirouetting in the

breeze from the hallway. He thought about how they would stare at him, coo at him,

shake their heads in wonder at his pale white feet and his courage in doing this

tremendous thing. And while he thought, he knotted and unknotted the noose,

determined to make as professional a job of it as he possibly could.

His only anxiety was the confession. Despite his working with books day in,

day out, words weren't his strongest point: they slipped away for him, like beauty

from his fat hands. But he wanted to say something about the children, just so

they'd know, the people who found him and photographed him, that this wasn't a

nobody they were staring at, but a man who'd done the worst things in the world for

the best possible reasons. That was vital: that they knew who he was, because maybe

in time they'd make sense of him in a way that he'd never been able to.

They had methods of interrogation, he knew, even with dead people. They'd

lay him in an ice room and examine him minutely, and when they'd studied him from

the outside they'd start looking at his inside, and oh! what things they'd find.

They'd saw off the top of his skull and take out his brain; examine it for tumors,

slice it thinly like expensive ham, probe at it in a hundred ways to find out the

why and how of him. But that wouldn't work, would it? He, of all people, should know

that. You cut up a thing that's alive and beautiful to find out how it's alive and

why it's beautiful and before you know it, it's neither of those things, and you're

standing there with blood on your face and tears in your sight and only the terrible

ache of guilt to show for it. No, they'd get nothing from his brain, they'd have to

look further than that. They'd have to unzip him from neck to pubis, snip his ribs

Page 258

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

and fold them back: Only then could they unravel his guts, and rummage in his

stomach, and juggle his liver and lights. There, oh yes, there, they'd find plenty

to feast their eyes on.

Maybe that was the best confession then, he mused as he retied the noose one

final time. No use to try to find the right words, because what were words anyway?

Trash, useless for the hot heart of things. No, they'd find all they

needed to know

if they just looked inside him. Find the story of the lost children, find the glory

of his martyrdom. And they'd know, once and for all, that he was of the Tribe of the

Razor-Eaters.

He finished the noose, made himself a second cup of coffee, and started work

on getting the rope secure. First he removed the lamp that hung from the middle of

the ceiling, then he tied the noose up there in its place. It was strong. He swung

from it for a few moments to make certain of it, and though the beams grunted a

little, and there was a patter of plaster on his head, it bore his weight.

By now it was early evening, and he was tired, the fatigue making him more

clumsy than usual. He shunted around the room tidying it up, his pig-fat body

wracked with sighs as he bundled up the stained sheets and tucked them out of sight,

rinsed his coffee cup, and carefully poured away the milk so that it wouldn't curdle

before they came. He turned on the radio as he worked; it would help to cover the

sound of the chair being kicked over when the time came: there were others in the

house and he didn't want any last-minute reprieve. The usual

banalities from the

radio station filled the room: songs of love and loss and love found again. Vicious

and painful lies, all of them.

There was little strength left in the day once he'd finished preparing the

room. He heard feet in the hallway and doors being opened elsewhere in the house as

the occupants of the other rooms came home from work. They, like him, lived alone.

He knew none of them by name; none of them, seeing him taken out escorted by police,

would know his.

He undressed completely and washed himself at the sink, his testicles small

as walnuts, tight to his body, his belly flab-the fat of his breasts and upper

arms-quivering as the cold convulsed him. Once satisfied with his cleanliness, he

sat on the mattress edge and cut his toenails. Then he dressed in freshly laundered

clothes: the blue shirt, the gray trousers. He wore no shoes or socks. Of the

physique that shamed him, his feet were his only pride.

It was almost dark by the time he finished, and the night was black and

rainy. Time to go, he thought.

He positioned the chair carefully, stepped up onto it, and reached for the

rope. The noose was if anything, an inch or two too high, and he had to go on tiptoe

to fit it snugly around his neck, but he fitted it securely with a little

maneuvering. Once he had the knot pulled tight against his skin he said his prayers

and kicked the chair over.

Panic began immediately, and his hands, which he'd always trusted, betrayed

him at this vital juncture, springing up from his sides and tearing at the rope as

it tightened. The initial drop had not broken his neck, but his spine felt like a

vast centipede sewn into his back, writhing now every way it could, causing his legs

to spasm. The pain was the least of it: the real anguish came from being out of

control, smelling his bowels giving

out into his clean trousers without his say-so, his penis stiffening without a

lustful thought in his popping head, his heels digging the air looking for purchase,

fingers still scrabbling at the rope. All suddenly not his own, all too hot for

their own preservation to hold still and die.

But their efforts were in vain. He'd planned this too carefully for it to go

awry. The rope was tightening still, the cavortings of the centipede weakening.

Life, this unwelcome visitor, would leave very soon. There was a lot of noise in his

head, almost as though he was underground, and hearing all the sounds of the earth.

Rushing noises, the roar of great hidden weirs, the bubbling of molten stone. Breer,

the great Razor-Eater, knew the earth very well. He'd buried dead beauties in it all

too often, and filled his mouth with soil as penitence for the intrusion, chewing on

it as he covered over their pastel bodies. Now the earth noises had blotted out

everything-his gasps, the music from the radio, and the traffic outside the window.

Sight was going too; lace darkness crept over the room, its patterns pulsing. He

knew he was turning-there was the bed, now the wardrobe, now the sink-but the forms

he fitfully saw were decaying.

His body had given up the good fight. His tongue flapped perhaps, or maybe

Page 259

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

he imagined the motion, just as surely as he imagined the sound of somebody calling

his name.

Quite abruptly, sight went out completely, and death was on him. No flood of

regrets attended the ending, no lightning regurgitation of a life history encrusted

with guilt. Just a dark, and a deeper dark, and now a dark so deep night was

luminous by comparison with it. And it was over, easily.

No; not over.

Not quite over. A cluster of unwelcome sensations swarmed over him,

intruding on the privacy of his death. A breeze warmed his face, assaulting his

nerve endings. An ungracious breath choked him, pressing into his flaccid lungs

without the least invitation.

He fought the resurrection, but his Savior was insistent. The room began to

reassemble itself around him. First light, then form. Now color, albeit drained and

grimy. The noises-fiery rivers and liquid stone alike-were gone. He was hearing

himself cough, and smelling his own vomit. Despair mocked him. Could he not even

kill himself successfully?

Somebody said his name. He shook his head, but the voice came again, and

this time his upturned eyes found a face.

And oh it was not over: far from it. He had not been delivered into

Heaven

or Hell. Neither would dare boast the face he was now staring up into.

"I thought I'd lost you, Anthony," said the Last European.

19

He had righted the chair Breer had used to stand on for his suicide attempt, and was

sitting on it, looking as unsullied as ever. Breer tried to say something, but his

tongue felt too fat for his mouth, and when he felt it his fingers came back bloody.

"You bit your tongue in your enthusiasm," said the European. "You won't be

able to eat or speak too well for a while. But it'll heal, Anthony. Everything heals

given time."

Breer had no energy to get up off the floor; all he could do was lie there,

the noose still tight around his neck, staring up at the severed rope that still

depended from the light fixture. The European had obviously just cut him down and

let him fall. His body had begun to shake; his teeth were chattering like a mad

monkey's.

"You're in shock," said the European. "You lie there . . . I'll make some tea, shall I? Sweet tea is just the thing."

It took some effort, but Breer managed to haul himself off the floor and

onto the bed. His trousers were soiled, front and back: he felt disgusting. But the

European didn't mind. He forgave all, Breer knew that. No other man Breer had ever

met was quite so capable of forgiveness; it humbled him to be in the company and the

care of such easy humanity. Here was a man who knew the secret heart of his

corruption, and never once spoke a word of censure.

Propped up on the bed, feeling the signs of life reappearing in his wracked

body, Breer watched the European making the tea. They were very different people.

Breer had always felt awed by this man. Yet hadn't the European told him once: "I am

the last of my tribe, Anthony, just as you are the last of yours. We are in so many

ways the same"? Breer hadn't understood the significance of the remark when he'd

first heard it, but he'd come to understand in time. "I am the last true European;

you are the last of the Razor-Eaters. We should try to help each other. " And the

European had gone on to do just that, keeping Breer from capture on two or three

occasions, celebrating his trespasses, teaching him that to be a Razor-Eater was a

worthy estate. In return for this education he'd asked scarcely anything: a few

minor services, no more. But Breer wasn't so trusting that he didn't suspect a time

would come when the Last European-please call me Mr. Mamouljian, he used to say, but

Breer had never really got his tongue around that comical name-when this strange

companion would ask for help in his turn. It wouldn't be an odd job or two he'd ask

either; it would be something terrible. Breer knew that, and feared it.

In dying he had hoped to escape the debt ever being called in. The longer

he'd been away from Mr. Mamouljian-and it was six years since they'd last met-the

more the memory of the man had come to frighten Breer. The European's image had not

faded with time: quite the contrary. His eyes, his hands, the caress of his voice

had stayed crystal-clear when yesterday's events had become a blur. It was as if

Mamouljian had never quite gone, as though he'd left a sliver of himself in Breer's

head to polish up his picture when time dirtied it; to keep a watch on his servant's

Page 260

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

every deed.

No surprise then, that the man had come in when he had, interrupting the

death scene before it could be played out. No surprise either that he was talking to

Breer now as though they'd never been parted, as though he was the loving husband to

Breer's devoted wife, and the years had never intervened. Breer watched Mamouliau

move from sink to table as he prepared the tea, locating the pot, setting out the

cups, performing each domestic act with hypnotic economy. The debt would have to be

paid, he knew that now. There would be no darkness until it was paid. At the

thought, Breer began to sob quietly.

"Don't cry," said Mamouliau, not turning from the sink.

"I wanted to die," Breer murmured. The words came out as though through a

mouthful of pebbles.

"You can't perish yet, Anthony. You owe me a little time. Surely you must

see that?"

"I wanted to die," was all Breer could repeat in response. He was trying not

to hate the European, because the man would know. He'd feel it for certain, and

maybe lose his temper. But it was so difficult: resentment bubbled up through the

sobbing.

"Has life been treating you badly?" the European asked.

Breer sniffed. He didn't want a father confessor, he wanted the dark.

Couldn't Mamoulia understand that he was past explanations, past healing? He was

shit on the shoe of a mongol, the most worthless, irredeemable thing in creation.

The image of himself as a Razor-Eater, as the last representative of a once-terrible

tribe, had kept his self-esteem intact for a few perilous years, but the fantasy had

long since lost its power to sanctify his vileness. There was no possibility of

working the same trick twice. And it was a trick, just a trick, Breer knew that, and

hated Mamoulia all the more for his manipulations. I want to be dead, was all he

could think.

Did he say the words out loud? He hadn't heard himself speak, but Mamoulia

answered him as though he had.

"Of course you do. I understand, I really do. You think it's all an

illusion: tribes, and dreams of salvation. But take it from me, it isn't. There's

purpose in the world yet. For both of us."

Breer drew the back of his hand across his swollen eyes, and tried to

control his sobs. His teeth no longer chattered; that was something.

"Have the years been so cruel?" the European inquired.

"Yes," Breer said sullenly.

The other nodded, looking across at the Razor-Eater with compassion in his

eyes; or at least an adequate impersonation of same.

"At least they didn't lock you away," he said. "You've been careful."

"You taught me how," Breer conceded.

"I showed you only what you already knew, but were too confused by other

people to see. If you've forgotten, I can show you again."

Breer looked down at the cup of sweet, milkless tea the European had set on

the bedside table.

"-or do you no longer trust me?"

"Things have changed," Breer mumbled with his thick mouth.

Now it was Mamoulia's turn to sigh. He sat on the chair again, and sipped

at his own tea before replying.

"Yes, I'm afraid you're right. There's less and less place for us here. But does that mean we should throw up our hands and die?"

Looking at the sober, aristocratic face, at the haunted hollows of his eyes,

Breer began to remember why he'd trusted this man. The fear he'd felt was dwindling,

the anger too. There was a calm in the air, and it was seeping into Breer's system.

"Drink your tea, Anthony."

"Thank you."

"Then I think you should change your trousers."

Breer blushed; he couldn't help himself.

"Your body responded quite naturally, there's nothing to be ashamed of.

Semen and shit make the world go round."

The European laughed, softly, into his teacup, and Breer, not feeling the

joke to be at his expense, joined in.

"I never forgot you," Mamouliau said. "I told you I'd come back for you and

I meant what I said."

Page 261

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

Breer nursed his cup in hands that still trembled, and met Mamouliau's gaze.

The look was as unfathomable as he'd remembered, but he felt warm toward the man. As

the European said, he hadn't forgotten, he hadn't gone away never to return. Maybe

he had his own reasons for being here now maybe he'd come to squeeze payment out of

a long-standing debtor, but that was better, wasn't it, than being

forgotten

entirely?

"Why come back now?" he asked, putting down his cup.

"I have business," Mamouljian replied.

"And you need my help?"

"That's right."

Breer nodded. The tears had stopped entirely. The tea had done him good: he

felt strong enough to ask an insolent question or two.

"What about me?" came the reply.

The European frowned at the inquiry. The lamp beside the bed flickered, as

though the bulb was at crisis point, and about to go out.

"What about you?" he asked.

Breer was aware that he was on tricky ground, but he was determined not to

be weak. If Mamouljian wanted help, then he should be prepared to deliver something

in exchange.

"What's in it for me?" he asked.

"You can be with me again," the European said.

Breer grunted. The offer was less than tempting.

"Is that not enough?" Mamouljian wanted to know. The lamplight was more

fitful by the moment, and Breer had suddenly lost his taste for impertinence.

"Answer me, Anthony," the European insisted. "If you've got an objection,

voice it."

The flickering was worsening, and Breer knew he'd made an error, pressing

Mamouliau for a covenant. Why hadn't he remembered that the European loathed

bargains and bargainers alike? Instinctively he fingered the noose groove around his

neck. It was deep, and permanent.

"I'm sorry . . ." he said, rather lamely.

Just before the lamp bulb gave out completely, he saw Mamouliau shake his

head. A tiny shake, like a tick. Then the room was drowned in darkness.

"Are you with me, Anthony?" the Last European murmured.

The voice, normally so even, was twisted out of true.

"Yes . . ." Breer replied. His lazy eyes weren't becoming accustomed to the

dark with their usual speed. He squinted, trying to sort out the European's form in

the surrounding gloom. He needn't have troubled himself. Scant seconds later

something across the room from him seemed to ignite, and suddenly, awesomely, the

European was providing his own illumination.

Now, with this lurid lantern show to set his sanity reeling, tea and apologies were forgotten: The dark, life itself, were forgotten; and there was only

time, in a room turned inside out with terrors and petals, to stare and stare and

maybe, if one had a sense of the ridiculous, to say a little prayer.

20

Alone in Breer's sordid one-room flat the Last European sat himself down and played

solitaire with his favorite pack of cards. The Razor-Eater had dressed himself up

and gone out to taste the night. If he concentrated, Mamoulia could find the

parasite with his mind, and taste vicariously whatever experiences the other man was

enjoying. But he had no appetite for such games. Besides, he knew all too well what

the Razor-Eater would be doing, and it frankly revolted him. All pursuits of the

flesh, whether conventional or perverse, appalled him, and as he grew older the

disgust deepened. On some days he could barely stand to look at the human animal

without the roving gloss of its eye or the pinkness of its tongue awaking nausea in

him. But Breer would be useful in the struggle to come; and his bizarre desires gave

him an insight, albeit crude, into Mamouljian's tragedy, an insight that made him a

more compliant attendant than the usual companions the European had tolerated in his

long, long life.

Most of the men and women in whom Mamouljian had placed his trust had

betrayed him. The pattern had repeated itself so often down the decades that he was

sure he would one day become hardened to the pain such betrayals caused. But he

never achieved such precious indifference. The cruelty of other people-their callous

usage of him-never failed to wound him, and though he had extended his charitable

Page 262

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

hand to all manner of crippled psyches, such ingratitude was unforgivable. Perhaps,

he mused, when this endgame was all over and done with-when he'd collected his debts

in blood, dread and night-then maybe he'd lose the terrible itch that tormented him

day and night, that drove him on without hope of peace to new ambitions and new

betrayals. Maybe when all this was over he would be able to lie down and die.

The pack in his hand was pornographic. He played with it only when

he was

feeling strong, and only then alone. Handling the images of extreme sensuality was a

test he set himself, one that if he failed, he would fail in private. Today the

filth on the cards was, after all, just human depravity; he could turn the designs

over and not be distressed by them. He even appreciated their wit: the way each of

the suits detailed a different area of sexual activity, the spots incorporated into

each intricately rendered picture. Hearts represented male/female congress, though

by no means limited to the missionary position. Spades were oralist, depicting

simple fellatio and its more elaborate variations. Clubs were analist: the spot

cards portraying homosexual and heterosexual buggery, the court cards, anal sex with

animals. Diamonds, the most exquisitely drawn of the suits, were sadomasochistic,

and here the artist's imagination had known no bounds. On these cards men and women

suffered all manner of humiliation, their wracked bodies bearing diamond-shaped

wounds to designate each card.

But the grossest image in the pack was that of the Joker. He was a coprophiliac, and sat down before a plateful of steaming excrement,

his eyes vast

with greed, while a scabby monkey, its bald face horribly human,
bared its puckered

backside to the viewer.

Mamouljian picked up the card and studied the picture. The leering
face of

the shit-eating fool brought the bitterest of smiles to his bloodless lips.
This was

surely the definitive human portrait. The other pictures on the cards,
with their

pretensions to love and physical pleasure, only hid this terrible truth
away for a

while. Sooner or later, however ripe the body, however glorious the
face, whatever

wealth or power or faith could promise, a man was escorted to a table
groaning under

the weight of his own excrement and obliged, even though his
instincts might revolt,

to eat.

That was what he was here for. To make a man eat shit.

He dropped the card onto the table, and spat a barking laugh from his
throat. There would be such torment soon; such terrible scenes.

No pit is deep enough, he promised the room; the cards and cups; the
whole

dirty world.

No pit is deep enough.

Skeleton Dance

21

The man in the underground train was naming constellations.

"Andromeda . . . Ursa, the Bear . . . Cygnus, the Swan . . ." His monologue

was for the most part ignored, though when a couple of young men told him to shut

his trap he replied, barely altering the rhythm of his naming, with a smile and a

"You'll die for that," slipped between one star and the next. The reply silenced the

heckler, and the lunatic went back to his sky-watching.

Toy took it as a good sign. He was much preoccupied by signs these days,

though he'd never really thought of himself as a superstitious man. Perhaps it was

his mother's Catholicism, which he'd rejected at an early age, at last finding an

outlet. In place of the myths of Virgin birth and transubstantiation he was finding

significance in small coincidences-avoiding standing ladders and performing

half-remembered rituals with spilled salt. All this was quite recent-only the last

year or two-and it had started with the woman he was even now going to meet: Yvonne.

It wasn't that she was a God-fearing woman. She wasn't. But the consolation she'd

brought into his life brought with it the danger of its disappearance. That was what

made him cautious with ladders and respectful to salt: the fear of losing her. With

Yvonne in his life he had new reason to keep the fates friendly.

He had met her six years ago. She'd been a secretary then, working with the

UK Branch of a German chemical corporation. A sprightly, good-looking woman in her

middle thirties, whose formality, he'd guessed, disguised humor and warmth in

abundance. He'd been attracted to her from the beginning, but his natural hesitancy

Page 263

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

in such matters, and the considerable difference in their ages, kept him from making

any overtures. Eventually it was Yvonne who broke the ice between them, commenting

on small things about his appearance-a recent haircut, a new tie-and so making her

interest in him perfectly plain. Once the signal had been given, Toy had proposed

dinner, and she'd accepted. It had been the beginning of the most rewarding months

of Toy's life.

He was not an overly emotional man. The very lack of extremes in his nature

had made him a useful part of Whitehead's entourage, and he had nurtured his reserve

as the salable commodity it was until, by the time he met Yvonne, he'd almost come

to believe his own publicity. She it was who first called him a cold fish; she who

taught him (difficult lesson that it was) the importance of showing weakness, if not

to the world at large at least to intimates. It had taken him time. He was

fifty-three when they met, and this new way of thinking went against the grain. But

she persisted, and slowly, the melt began. Once it did, he wondered how he had ever

lived the life he had for the previous twenty years; a life of servitude to a man

whose compassion was negligible, and ego, monstrous. He saw, through Yvonne's eyes,

the cruelty in Whitehead, the arrogance, the mythmaking; and though he showed, he

hoped, no change in his superficial attitudes to his employer, beneath the

conciliation and the humility there increasingly simmered a resentment that

approached hatred. Only now, after six years, could Toy contemplate his own

contradictory feelings about the old man, and even now he found

himself forgetting

the worst; at least when he was out of Yvonne's sphere of influence. It was so

difficult when he was in the house, subject to Whitehead's whim, to keep the

perspective she'd given him, to see the sacred monster for what he was: monstrous,

but far from sacred.

After twelve months Toy had moved Yvonne into the house Whitehead had

purchased for him in Pimlico; a retreat from the world of the Whitehead Corporation

that the old man never inquired about, a place where he and Yvonne could talk-or be

silent-together; where he could indulge his passion for Schubert, and she could

write letters to her family, which was spread across half the globe.

That night, when he got back, he told her about the man on the train, the

constellation namer. She found the whole story pointless; couldn't see the romance

of it at all.

"I just thought it was strange," he said.

"I suppose it is," she replied, unimpressed, and went back to her dinner preparations. A few words on, she stopped.

"What's wrong, Billy?"

"Why should something be wrong?"

"Everything's fine?"

"Yes."

"Really?"

She was always quick to ferret out his secrets. He gave up before she really

began on him; it wasn't worth the effort of deception. He stroked the ridge of his

broken nose, a familiar trick when he was nervous. Then he said, "It's all going to

come down. Everything." His voice trembled and fell away. When it was clear he

wasn't going to elaborate she put down the dinner plates and crossed to his chair.

He looked up, almost startled, when she touched his ear.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked, more gently than before.

He took hold of her hand.

"There might come a time . . . not so far away . . . when I'd ask you to leave with me," he said.

"Leave?"

"Just up and go."

"Where?"

"I haven't thought that through yet. We'd just go." He halted, and looked at

her fingers, which were now dovetailed with his. "Would you come with me?" he asked

at last.

"Of course."

"Ask no questions?"

"What is this, Billy?"

"I said: ask no questions.

"Just go?"

"Just go."

She looked long and hard at him: he was washed out, poor love. Too much of

Page 264

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

that wretched old fart in Oxford. How she hated Whitehead, though she'd never met

him.

"Yes, of course I'd go," she replied.

He nodded. She thought he might cry.

"When?" she said.

"I don't know." He tried to smile, but it looked misbegotten. "Perhaps

it

won't even be necessary. But I think it's all going to come down, and when it does I

don't want us to be there."

"You make it sound like the end of the world."

He didn't reply. She didn't feel able to chisel at him for answers: he was

too delicate.

"Just one question?" she ventured. "It's important to me." one.

"Did you do something, Billy? I mean, something illegal? Is that what it is?

His Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed his grief. There was so much more

she had to teach him yet; about allowing those feelings out. He wanted to: she could

see so much bubbling away behind his eyes. But there, for now, it would stay. She

knew better than to press him. He'd only withdraw. And he needed her undemanding

presence more than she needed answers.

"It's all right," she said, "there's no need to tell me if you don't want to.

His hand was gripping hers so tightly she thought they'd never unknot them.

"Oh, Billy. Nothing's that terrible," she murmured.

Again, he made no reply.

The old haunts were much the same as Marty had remembered them, but he felt like a

ghost there. Along the rubbish-strewn back alleys where he'd fought and run as a boy

there were new combatants, and, he suspected, far more serious games. They were glue

sniffers, these grubby ten-year-olds, according to the pages of the Sunday tabloids.

They would grow up, disenfranchised, into needle freaks and pill pushers; they cared

for nothing and nobody, least of all themselves.

He'd been an adolescent criminal, of course. Theft was a rite of passage

here. But it had usually been that lazy, almost passive form of thieving: sidling up

to something and walking, or driving, away with it. If the theft looked too

problematic, forget it. Plenty of other shiny things to be fingered. It wasn't crime

in the way he'd come to understand the word later. It was the magpie instinct at

work, taking whatever opportunity offered, never intending much harm by it, or

working up a sweat if things didn't quite fall your way.

But these kids-there was a group of them lounging on the corner of Knox

Street-they looked like a more lethal breed altogether. Though they'd

grown up in

the same lusterless environment, he and they, with its few wretched attempts at tree

planting, its barbed wire and glass-topped walls, its relentless concrete-though

they shared all that, he knew they'd have nothing to say to one another. Their

desperation and their lassitude intimidated him: he felt nothing was beyond them.

Not a place to grow up in, this street, or any of them, along the row. In a way he

was glad his mother had died before the worst of the changes disfigured the

neighborhood.

He got to Number Twenty-six. It had been repainted. On one of her visits

Charmaine had told him Terry, one of her brothers-in-law, had done it for her a

couple of years back, but Marty had forgotten, and the change of color, after so

many years of imagining it green and white, was a slap in the face. It was a bad

job, purely cosmetic, and the paint on the windowsills was lifting and peeling

already. Through the window the lace curtains that he'd always loathed so much had

been replaced with a blind, which was down. On the window ledge inside a collection

of porcelain figures, wedding presents, gathered dust, trapped in the forsaken space

between blind and glass.

He still had his keys, but he couldn't bring himself to use them. Besides,

she'd probably changed the lock. Instead, he pressed the bell. It didn't ring in the

house, and he knew it was audible from the street, so it clearly no longer worked.

He rapped his knuckles on the door.

For half a minute there was no sound from inside. Then, eventually, he heard

dragging footsteps (she'd be wearing open-backed sandals, he guessed, and they made

her walk ragged), and Charmaine opened the door. Her face was not made-up, and its

nakedness made even plainer response to his standing there. She was unpleasantly

Page 265

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

surprised.

"Marty," was all she managed to say. No welcoming smile, no tears.

"I came on the off-chance," he said, attempting nonchalance. But it was

obvious that he'd made a tactical error from the moment she sighted him.

"I thought you weren't allowed out-"she said, then corrected herself, "-I

mean, you know, I thought you weren't allowed off the estate."

"I asked for special dispensation," he said. "Can I come in, or do we talk

on the doorstep?"

"Oh . . . oh, yes. Of course."

He stepped inside, and she closed the door behind him. There was an uncomfortable moment in the narrow hallway. Their proximity seemed to demand an

embrace, yet he felt unable, and she unwilling, to make the gesture. She compromised

with a patently artificial smile, followed by a light kiss on the cheek.

"I'm sorry," she said, apologizing for nothing in particular. She led him down the hallway to the kitchen. "I just didn't expect you, that's all. Come on in.

The place is in chaos, I'm afraid."

The house smelled stale; as though it needed a good airing. Washing, drying

on the radiators, made the atmosphere muggy, like the sauna back at the Sanctuary.

"Take a seat," she said, lifting a bag of unsorted groceries off one of the

kitchen chairs, "I'll just finish here." There was a second load of dirty washing on

the kitchen table-hygienic as ever-which she began to load into the washing machine,

her chatter nervous, her eyes never meeting his as she concentrated on the matter in

hand; the towels, the underwear, the blouses. He recognized none of the clothes, and

found himself ferreting through the soiled items looking for something he had seen

her in before. If not six years before, then in visits to the prison. But it was all

new stuff.

"I just didn't expect you-" she was saying, closing the machine and loading

powder into it. "I was sure you'd call first. And look at me; I look like a wet rag.

God, it would be today, I've got so much to do-" She finished with the machine,

pushed the sleeves of her sweater back up, said: "Coffee?" and turned to the kettle

to make some without waiting for an answer. "You look well, Marty, you really do."

How did she know? She'd scarcely taken two glances at him in her whirlwind

of activity. Whereas he, he couldn't take his eyes off her. He sat watching her at

the sink, wringing out a cloth to swab down the counter, and nothing had changed in

six years-not really-just a few lines on their faces. He had a feeling in him that

was like panic; something to be held down for fear it make a fool of him.

She made him coffee; talked about the way the neighborhood had changed;

about Terry and the saga of choosing the paint for the front of the house; about how

much it cost on the subway from Mile End to Wandsworth; about how well he

looked-"You really do, Marty, I'm not just saying that"-she talked about everything

but something. It wasn't Charmaine talking, and that hurt. Hurt her too, he knew.

She was marking time with him, that was all it was, filling the minutes with vacuous

chat until he gave up in despair and left.

"Look," she said. "I really must change."

"Going out?"

"Yes."

"Oh."

"-if you'd said, Marty, I would have cleared a space. Why didn't you ring

me?"

"Maybe we could go out for a meal sometime?" he suggested.

"Maybe."

She was viciously noncommittal.

"-things are a bit hectic just at the moment."

"I'd like a chance to talk. You know, properly."

She was getting edgy: he knew the signs well, and she was aware of his

scrutiny. She picked up the coffee mugs and took them to the sink.

"I really must dash," she said. "Make yourself some more coffee if you want.

Stuff's in the-well, you know where it is. There's a lot of things of yours here,

you know. Motorcycle magazines and stuff. I'll sort them out for you. Excuse me. I

have to change."

She hurried-positively raced, he thought-into the hallway, and went

upstairs. He heard her moving about heavily; she was never light-footed. Water was

running in the bathroom. The toilet flushed. He wandered through from the kitchen

into the back room. It smelled of old cigarettes, and the ashtray balanced on the

Page 266

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

arm of the new sofa was brimming. He stood in the doorway and stared at the objects

in the room rather as he had at the dirty washing, searching for something familiar.

There was very little. The clock on the wall was a wedding present, and still in the

same place. The stereo in the corner was new, a flashy model that Terry had probably

acquired for her. Judging by the dust on the lid it was seldom used, and the

collection of records haphazardly stacked alongside was as small as ever. Among

those records was there still a copy of Buddy Holly singing "True Love Ways"? They'd

played that so often it must have been worn thin; they'd danced to it together in

this very room-not danced exactly, but used the music as an excuse to hold each

other, as if excuses were needed. It was one of those love songs that made him feel

romantic and unhappy simultaneously-as though every phrase of it was charged with

loss of the very love it celebrated. Those were the best kind of love songs, and the

truest.

Unable to bear the room any longer, he went upstairs.

She was still in the bathroom. There was no lock on the door; she'd been

locked in a bathroom as a small child, and had such a terror of the same thing

happening again she'd always insisted there be no locks on any of the internal doors

in the house. You had to whistle on the toilet if you wanted to stop people walking

in on you. He pushed the door open. She was dressed only in her panties; arm raised,

shaving her armpit. She caught his eye in the mirror, then went back to what she was

doing.

"I didn't want any more coffee," he said lamely.

"Got used to the expensive stuff, have you?" she said.

Her body was a few feet from him, and he felt the pull of it. He knew every

mole on her back, knew the places a touch would make her laugh. Such familiarity was

a kind of ownership, he felt; she owned him for the same reasons if she would just

exercise her right. He crossed to her and put his fingertips on her lower back, and

ran them up her spine.

"Charmaine."

She looked at him in the mirror again-the first unswerving look she'd

granted him since he'd arrived at the house-and he knew that any hope of physicality

between them was a lost cause.

"I'm not available, Marty," she said plainly.

"We're still married."

"I don't want you to stay. I'm sorry."

That's how she'd begun this meeting: with "I'm sorry." Now she wanted to

finish it in the same way; no genuine apology intended, just a polite brush-off.

"I've thought about this so often," he said.

"So have I," she replied. "But I stopped thinking about it five years ago.

It won't do any good; you know that as well as I do."

His fingers were now on her shoulder. He was sure there was a charge in

their contact, a buzz of excitement exchanged between her flesh and his. Her nipples

had hardened; perhaps the draft from the landing, perhaps his touch.

"I'd like you to go," she said very quietly, looking down into the sink.

There was a tremor in her voice that could easily become tears. He wanted tears from

her, shameful as it was. If she wept he'd kiss her to console her, and his

consolation would harden as she softened, and they'd finish up in bed; he knew it.

That was why she was fighting so hard to show nothing, knowing the scenario as well

as he did, and determined not to leave herself open to his affection.

"Please," she said again, with indisputable finality. His hand dropped from

her shoulder. There was no spark between them; it was all in his mind. All ancient

history.

"Maybe some other time." He muttered the cliché as if it were poisoned.

"Yes," she said, pleased to sound a note of conciliation, however lame.

"Ring me first though."

"I'll let myself out."

23

He wandered around for an hour, dodging hordes of schoolchildren returning home,

picking fights and noses as they went. There were signs of spring, even here. Nature

could scarcely be bountiful in such restraining circumstances, but it did its best.

In tiny front gardens, and in window boxes, flowers blossomed; the few saplings that

had survived vandalism showed sweet green leaves. If they survived a few more

seasons of frost and malice they might grow large enough for birds to nest in.

Page 267

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

Nothing exotic: brawling starlings at best, probably. But they'd offer shade in high

summer, and places for the moon to sit if you looked out your bedroom window one

night. He found himself full of such inappropriate thoughts-moon and starlings-like

an adolescent first in love. Coming back here had been a mistake; it had been a

self-inflicted cruelty that had hurt Charmaine too. Useless to go back and

apologize, that would only make matters messier. He'd ring her, as she'd suggested,

and ask her out to one farewell dinner. Then he'd tell her, whether it was true or

not, that he was ready for them to part permanently, and he hoped he'd see her once

in a while, and they'd say goodbye in a civilized fashion, without enmity, and she'd

go back to whatever life she was making for herself, and he'd go to his. To

Whitehead, to Carys. Yes, to Carys.

And suddenly tears were on him like a fury, tearing him to pieces, and he

was standing in the middle of some street he didn't recognize, blinded by them.

Schoolchildren buffeted him as they ran past, some turning, some seeing his anguish

and yelling obscenities at him as they went. This is ridiculous, he told himself,

but no amount of name-calling would halt the flow. So he wandered, hand to face,

into an alley, and stayed there till the bout passed. Part of him felt quite removed

from this burst of emotion. It looked down, this untouched part, on his sobbing

self, and shook its head in contempt for his weakness and confusion. He hated to see

men cry, it embarrassed him; but there was no gainsaying it. He was lost; that was

all there was to it, lost and afraid. That was worth crying for.

When the flow stopped he felt better, but shaky. He wiped his face, and

stayed in the backwater of the alley until he'd regained his composure.

It was four-forty. He'd already been to Holborn and picked up the strawberries; that was his first duty when he drove into town. Now, with that done,

and Charmaine seen, the rest of the night sprawled in front of him, waiting to be

pleasured. But he'd lost a lot of his enthusiasm for a night of adventure. In a

while the pubs would open, and he could get a couple of whiskies inside him. That

would help rid him of the twitches in his stomach. Maybe it would also whet his

appetite again, but he doubted it.

To occupy the time before opening, he wandered down to the shopping

precinct. It had been opened two years before he was put inside, a soulless warren

of white tiles, plastic palms, and flashy, up-market shops. Now, almost a decade

after it was built, it looked about ready for demolition. It was scarred with

graffiti, its tunnels and stairways filthy, many of its shops closed up, others so

bereft of charm or custom surely the only option open to the owners was to fire them

one of these nights, collect the insurance and run for the hills. He

found a small

newsstand manned by a forlorn Pakistani, bought a packet of cigarettes and retraced

his steps to The Eclipse.

It was just past opening time, and the pub was almost deserted. A couple of

skinheads were playing darts; in the lounge bar somebody was celebrating: an off-key

chorus of "Happy Birthday, Dear Maureen," drifted through. The television had been

turned up for the early-evening news, but he couldn't catch much of it over the

noise of the celebrants, and wasn't that interested anyway. Collecting a whisky from

the bar he went to sit down, and began to smoke his way through the pack of

cigarettes he'd bought. He felt drained. The liquor, instead of putting some spark

into him, only made his limbs more leaden.

His thoughts drifted. Free association of ideas brought images into peculiar

communion. Carys, and him, and Buddy Holly. That song, "True Love Ways," playing in

the dovecote, while he danced with the girl in the chilly air.

When he shook the pictures from his head there were new customers at the

bar; a group of young men making enough noise, braying laughter mostly, to blank out

both the sound of the television and the birthday party. One of them was clearly the

hub of the entertainment, a lanky, rubber-jointed individual with a smile wide

enough to play Chopin on. It took Marty several seconds to register that he knew

this clown: it was Flynn. Of all the people he'd thought he might run into on this

turf, Flynn was just about the last. Marty half-stood, as Flynn's glance-an almost

magical coincidence-roved the room and fell on him. Marty froze, like an actor who'd

forgotten his next move, unable to advance or retreat. He wasn't sure he was ready

for a dose of Flynn. Then the comedian's face lit up with recognition, and it was

too late for retreat.

"Jesus fucking Christ," said Flynn. The grin faded, to be replaced,

momentarily, with a look of total bewilderment, before returning-more radiant than

ever. "Look who's here, will you?" and now he was coming toward Marty, arms

Page 268

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

outspread in welcome, the loudest shirt man had ever created revealed beneath the

well-cut jacket.

"Fucking hell. Marty! Marty!"

They half-embraced, half-shook hands. It was a difficult reunion, but Flynn

blustered over the cracks with a salesman's efficiency.

"What do you know? Of all people. Of all people!"

"Hello, Flynn."

Marty felt like a dowdy cousin in front of this instant joy machine, all quips and color. Flynn's smile was immovably in place now, and he was escorting

Marty across to the bar, introducing the circle of his audience (Marty caught half

of the names, and could put faces to none of them), then it was a double brandy for

everyone to celebrate Marty's homecoming.

"Didn't know you were out so soon," Flynn said, toasting his victim. "Here's

to time off for good behavior."

The rest of the party made no attempt to interrupt the master's flow, and

took instead to talking among themselves, leaving Marty at Flynn's mercy. He'd

changed very little. The style of the clothes, of course, that was different: he was

dressed, as ever, as last year's fashions demanded; he was losing hair too, receding

at quite a rate; but apart from that he was the same wisecracking faker he'd always

been, laying out a sparkling collection of fabrications for Marty to inspect. His

involvement with the music business, his contacts in L.A., his plans to open a

recording studio in the neighborhood. "Done a lot of thinking about you," he said.

"Wondered how you were getting on. Meant to visit; but I didn't think you'd thank me

for it." He was right. "Besides, I'm never here, you know? So tell me, old son, what

are you doing back?"

"I came to see Charmaine."

"Oh." He seemed almost to have forgotten who she was. "She OK?"

"So-so. You sound as if you're doing well."

"I've had my hassles, you know, but then who hasn't? I'm all right though,

you know." He lowered his voice to the barely audible. "The big money's in dope

these days. Not grass, the hard stuff. I handle cocaine mostly; occasionally the big

H. I don't like to touch it . . . but I've got expensive tastes." He pulled a "what

a world this is" face, turned to the bar to order more drinks, then talked on, a

seamless train of self-inflation and off-color remarks. After some initial

resistance Marty found himself succumbing to him. His tide of invention was as

irresistible as ever. Only occasionally did he pause to ask a question of his

audience, which was fine by Marty. He had little he wanted to tell. It had always

been that way. Flynn the rude boy, fast and smooth; Marty the quiet one, the one

with all the doubts. Like alter egos. Simply being with Flynn again Marty could feel

himself flung into sharper relief.

The evening passed very quickly. People joined Flynn, drank with him, and

wandered off again, having been entertained by the court jester for a while. There

were some individuals Marty knew among the traffic of drinkers, and a few

uncomfortable encounters, but it was all easier than he'd expected, smoothed on its

way by Flynn's bonhomie. About ten-fifteen he ducked out for a quarter of an

hour-"Just got to sort out a little business"-.and came back with a wad of money in

his inside pocket, which he immediately began to spend.

"What you need," he told Marty when they were both awash with drink, "what

you need is a good woman. No-" he giggled, "-no, no, no. What you need is a bad

woman."

Marty nodded; his head felt unstable on his neck. "You got it in one,"

he

said.

"Let's go find us a lady, eh? Shall we do that?"

"Suits me."

"I mean, you need company, man, and so do I. And I do a bit of that on the

side, you know? I've got a few ladies available. I'll see you all right."

Marty was too drunk to argue. Besides the thought of a woman-bought or

seduced, what the hell did it matter?-was the best idea he'd heard in a long while.

Flynn went away, made a telephone call, and came back leering.

"No trouble," he said. "No trouble at all. One more drink, then we'll hit the road."

Lamblike, Marty followed his lead. They had one more drink together, then

stagged out of The Eclipse and around the corner to Flynn's car, a Volvo that had

seen better days. They drove for five minutes to a house on the estate. The door was

Page 269

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

opened by a good-looking black woman.

"Ursula, this is my friend Marty. Marty, say hello to Ursula."

"Hello, Ursula."

"Where's the glasses, honey? Daddy bought a bottle."

They drank some more together, and then went upstairs; it was only then that

Marty realized Flynn wasn't going to leave. This was intended to be ménage à trois,

like the old days. His initial disquiet vanished when the girl began to undress for

them. The drink had taken the edge off his inhibitions, and he sat on the bed

encouraging her in her strip, dimly aware that Flynn was probably as much

entertained by his evident craving as he was by the girl. Let him watch, Marty

thought, it's his party.

In the small, badly lit bedroom Ursula's body looked sculpted from black

butter. In between her full breasts a small gold cross lay, glistening. Her skin

glistened too; each pore was marked with a pinprick of sweat. Flynn had started to

undress as well, and Marty followed suit, stumbling as he pulled off his jeans,

unwilling to relinquish the sight of the girl as she sat up on the bed and put her

hands to her groin.

What followed was a swift reeducation in the craft of sex. Like a swimmer

who returns to water after years of absence, he soon remembered the

strokes. In the

next two hours he gathered fistfuls of memories to take back with him: looking

around from Ursula's amused face to see Flynn kneeling at the bottom of the bed

sucking her toes; Ursula cooing like a black dove over his erection before devouring

it to the root; Flynn licking his hands and grinning, and licking and grinning. And

finally the two of them sharing Ursula, Flynn buried in her backside, making true

what, as an eleven-year-old, he had claimed you did with women.

Afterward, they dozed together. Sometime in the middle of the night Marty

stirred to see Flynn dressing, and shrinking away. Home presumably; wherever home

was these days and nights.

24

He woke just before dawn, disoriented for several seconds until he heard Ursula's

steady exhalations at his side. He said goodbye to her as she dozed, and found a cab

to take him back to his car. He was back at the Sanctuary by eight-thirty.

Exhaustion would hit him eventually, and a hangover too, but he knew his body clock

well. There'd be a few hours grace before the debt had to be paid.

Pearl was in the kitchen tidying up after breakfast. They exchanged a few

pleasantries, and he sat down to drink three cups of black coffee, one after the

other. His mouth tasted foul, and Ursula's perfume, which had smelled ambrosial the

previous night, was oversweet this morning. It lingered on his hands and in his

hair.

"Good night?" Pearl asked. He nodded without answering. "You'd better get a

good breakfast inside you; I won't be able to get you any lunch today."

"Why not?"

"Too busy with the dinner party."

"What dinner party?"

"Bill will tell you. He wants to see you. He's in the library."

Toy looked weary, but not as ill as he had when last they'd met. Maybe he'd

seen a doctor in the interim, or taken a holiday.

"You wanted to speak to me?"

"Yes, Marty, Yes. You enjoy your night on the town?"

"Very much. Thank you for making it possible."

"It wasn't my doing; it was Joe. You're well liked, Marty. Lillian tells me

even the dogs have taken to you."

Toy crossed to the table, opened the cigarette box, and selected a cigarette. Marty had not seen him smoke before.

"You won't be seeing Mr. Whitehead today; there's going to be a little get-together tonight-"

"Yes, Pearl told me."

"It's nothing special. Mr. Whitehead has dinners for a select few every now

and then. The point is, he likes them to be private gatherings, so you won't be

required."

This pleased Marty. At least he could go lie down, catch up on some sleep.

"Obviously we'd like you to be in the house, should you be needed for any

Page 270

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

reason, but I think it's unlikely."

"Thank you, sir."

"I think you can call me Bill in private, Marty; I don't see any need for formality any longer."

"OK."

"I mean . . ." He stopped to light the cigarette. ". . . we're all servants here, aren't we? In one way or another."

By the time he'd showered, thought about a run and discounted the

idea as

masochistic, then lain down to doze, the first signs of the inevitable hangover were

on the way. There was no cure that he knew of. The only option was to sleep it off.

He didn't wake until the middle of the afternoon, and only then roused by

hunger. There was no sound in the house. Downstairs the kitchen was empty, only the

buzz of a fly at the window-the first Marty had seen this season-interrupted the

glacial calm. Pearl had obviously finished whatever preparations were required for

this evening's dinner party, and gone, perhaps to come back later. He went to the

refrigerator and rifled it for something to quieten his growling belly. The sandwich

he constructed looked like an unmade bed, with sheets of ham tumbling out from its

bread blankets, but it did the job. He put on the coffee percolator and went in

search of company.

It was as though everyone had gone from the face of the earth. Wandering

through the deserted house the pit of the afternoon swallowed him. The stillness,

and the remains of his headache, conspired to make him jittery. He found himself

glancing behind him like a man on an ill-lit street. Upstairs was even quieter than

down; his footsteps on the carpeted landing were so hushed he might not have had

weight at all. Even so, he found himself creeping.

Halfway along the landing-Whitehead's landing-came the cutoff point beyond

which he had been instructed not to go. The old man's private suite was this end of

the house, as was Carys' bedroom. Which room was it most likely to be? He tried to

recreate the outside of the house, to locate the room by a process of elimination,

but he lacked the imaginative skill to correlate the exterior with the closed doors

of the corridor ahead.

Not all were closed. The third along on his right was slightly ajar: and

from inside, now his ears were attuned to the lowest level of audibility, he could

hear the sound of movement. Surely it was her. He crossed the invisible threshold

into forbidden territory, not thinking of what the punishment for trespass might be,

too eager to see her face, maybe to speak to her. He reached the door, and peered

through.

Carys was there. She was semirecumbent on the bed, staring into middle

distance. Marty was just about to step in to speak to her when somebody else moved

in the room, hidden from him by the door. He didn't have to wait for the voice to

know that it was Whitehead.

"Why do you treat me so badly?" he was asking her, his voice hushed. "You

know how it hurts me when you're like this."

She said nothing: if she even heard him she made no sign of it.

"I don't ask so much of you, do I?" he appealed. Her eyes flickered in his

direction. "Well, do I?"

Eventually, she deigned to reply. When she did her voice was so quiet Marty

could barely catch the words. "Aren't you ashamed?" she asked him.

"There are worse things, Carys, than having somebody need you; believe me."

"I know," she replied, taking her eyes off him. There was such pain, and

such submission in the face of that pain, in those two words: I know. It made Marty

suddenly sick with longing for her; to touch her, to try to heal the anonymous hurt.

Whitehead crossed the room and came to sit beside her on the edge of the bed. Marty

stepped back from the door, fearful of being spotted, but Whitehead's attention was

concentrated on the enigma in front of him.

"What do you know?" he asked her. The former gentility had suddenly evaporated. "Are you keeping something from me?"

"Just dreams," she replied. "More and more."

"Of what?"

"You know. The same."

"Your mother?"

Carys nodded, almost invisibly. "And others," she said. "Who?"

"They never show themselves."

Page 271

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

The old man sighed, and looked away from her. "And in the dreams?" he asked.

"What happens?"

"She tries to speak to me. She tries to tell me something."

Whitehead didn't inquire further: he seemed to be out of questions. His

shoulders had slumped. Carys looked at him, sensing his defeat.

"Where is she, Papa?" she asked him, leaning forward for the first time and

putting an arm around his neck. It was a blatantly manipulative gesture; she offered

this intimacy only to get what she wanted from him. How much had she offered, or he

taken, in their time together? Her face came close to his; the late-afternoon light

enchanted it. "Tell me, Papa," she asked again, "where do you think she is?" and

this time Marty grasped the taunt that lay beneath the apparently innocent question.

What it signified, he didn't know. What this whole scene, with its talk of coldness

and shame, meant, was far from clear. He was glad, in a way, not to know. But this

question, that she asked him so mock-lovingly, had been asked-and he had to wait a

moment longer, until the old man had answered it. "Where is she, Papa?"

"In dreams," he replied, his face averted from her. "Just in dreams."

She dropped her arm from his shoulder.

"Never lie to me," she charged him icily.

"It's all I can tell you," he replied; his tone was almost pitiable. "If you know more than I do-" He turned and looked at her, his voice urgent. "Do you know

something?"

"Oh, Papa," she murmured reproachfully, "more conspiracies?" How many feints

and counterfeints were there in this exchange? Marty puzzled. "You don't suspect me

now, surely?"

Whitehead frowned. "No, never you, darling," he said. "Never you."

He raised his hand to her face and leaned forward to put his dry lips to

hers. Before they touched, Marty left the door and slipped away.

There were some things he couldn't bring himself to watch.

25

Cars began to arrive at the house in the early evening. There were voices Marty

recognized in the hallway. It would be the usual crowd, he guessed; among them the

Fan-Dancer and his comrades; Ottaway, Curtsinger and Dwoskin. He heard women's

voices too. They'd brought their wives, or their mistresses. He wondered what kind

of women they were. Once beautiful, now sour and lovelorn. Bored with their

husbands, no doubt, who thought more of money-making than of them. He caught whiffs

of their laughter, and later, of their perfume, in the hallway. He'd always had a

good sense of smell. Saul would be proud of him.

About eight-fifteen he went into the kitchen and heated up the plate of

ravioli Pearl had left for him, then retired into the library to watch a few boxing

videos. The events of the afternoon still niggled him. Try as he might he couldn't

remove Carys from his head, and his emotional state, over which he had so little

control, irritated him. Why couldn't he be like Flynn, who bought a woman for the

night, then walked away the next morning? Why did his feelings always become

blurred, so that he couldn't sort one from the other? On the television set the

match was getting bloodier, but he scarcely registered the punishment or the

victory. His mind was conjuring Carys' sealed face as she lay on the bed, probing

it, looking for explanations.

Leaving the fight commentator to babble on, he went through to the kitchen

to fetch another couple of beers from the refrigerator. At this end of the house

there was not even a hint of noise from the party-goers. Besides, such a civilized

gathering would be hushed, wouldn't it? Just the clink of cut glass, and talk of

rich men's pleasures.

Well, fuck them all, he thought. Whitehead and Carys and all of them. It

wasn't his world and he wanted no part of it, or them, or her. He could get all the

women he wanted anytime-just pick up the phone and call Flynn. No trouble. Let them

play their damn-fool games: he wasn't interested. He drained the first can of beer

standing in the kitchen, then got out two more cans and took them through to the

lounge. He was going to get really blind tonight. Oh, yes. He was going to get so

drunk nothing would matter. Especially not her. Because he didn't care. He didn't

care.

The tape had finished, and the screen had gone blank. It buzzed with a

squirming pattern of dots. White noise. Wasn't that what they called it? It was a

portrait of chaos, that hissing, those writhing dots; the universe humming to

Page 272

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

itself. Empty airwaves were never really empty.

He turned the set off. He didn't want to watch any more matches. His head

buzzed like the box; white noise in there too.

He slumped down in the chair and downed the second can of beer in two

throatfuls. The image of Carys with Whitehead swam into focus again. "Go away," he

told it, aloud; but it lingered. Did he want her, was that it? Would this unease be

pacified if he took her to the dovecote one of these afternoons and humped her till

she begged him never to stop? The wretched thought only disgusted him; he couldn't

defuse these ambiguities with pornography.

As he opened the third beer he found his hands were sweating, a clammy sweat

he associated with sickness, like the first signs of flu. He wiped his palms on his

jeans and put the beer down. There was more than infatuation fueling his

nervousness. Something was wrong. He got up and went to the lounge window. He was

staring into the pitch darkness beyond the glass, when it struck him what the

wrongness might be. The lights on the lawn and perimeter fence had not been put on

tonight. He would have to do it. For the first time since he'd arrived at the house

it was real night outside, a night more black than any he'd experienced in many

years. In Wandsworth there was always light; floods on the walls burned from

twilight to dawn. But here, without streetlamps, there was just night outside.

Night; and white noise.

26

Though Marty had imagined otherwise, Carys wasn't at the dinner party. There were

very few freedoms left to her; refusing her father's invitations to

dinner was one

of them. She had endured an afternoon of his sudden tears, his just as sudden

accusations. She was weary of his kisses and his doubts. So tonight she'd given

herself a larger fix than usual, greedy for forgetfulness. Now all she wanted to do

was lie down and bask in not being.

Even as she lay her head on the pillow, something, or someone, touched her.

She came around again, startled. The bedroom was empty. The lamps were on and the

curtains drawn. There was nobody there: it was a trick of the senses, no more. Yet

she could still feel the nerve endings at the nape of her neck tingle where the

touch had seemed to come, responding, anemone-like, to the intrusion. She put her

fingers there and massaged the place. The jolt had snatched lethargy away for a

while. There was no chance of putting her head back down until her heart had stopped

hammering.

Sitting up, she wondered where her runner was. Probably at the dinner party

with the rest of Papa's court. They'd like that: to have him among them to

condescend to. She didn't think of him as an angel any longer. After

all he had a

name now, and a history (Toy had told her everything he knew). He'd long lost his

divinity. He was who he was-Martin Francis Strauss-a man with green-gray eyes; with

a scar on his cheek and hands that were eloquent, like an actor's hands, except that

she didn't think he'd be very good at professional deceit: his eyes betrayed him too

easily.

Then the touch came again, and this time she distinctly felt fingers

catching her nape, as though the bone of her spine had been pinched, so, so lightly,

between somebody's forefinger and thumb. It was absurd illusion, but too persuasive

to be dismissed.

She sat down at her dressing table and felt tremors moving out through her

body from her jittering stomach. Was this just the result of a bad fix? She'd never

had any problems before: the H that Luther bought from his Stratford suppliers was

always of the highest quality: Papa could afford it.

Go back and lie down, she told herself. Even if you can't sleep, lie down.

But the bed, as she stood and turned to walk back to it, receded from her, all the

contents of the room withdrawing into a corner as though they were painted on linen

and had been plucked away from her by some hidden hand.

Then the fingers seemed to be back on her neck again, more insistent this

time, as if working their way into her. She reached around and rubbed the back of

her neck vigorously, cursing Luther loudly for bringing her bad stuff. He was

probably buying cut heroin instead of the pure, and pocketing the difference. Her

anger cleansed her head for a few moments, or so it seemed, for nothing else

happened. She walked steadily across to the bed, orientating herself by putting her

hand on the flower-patterned wall as she went. Things began to right themselves; the

room found its proper perspective again. Sighing with relief she lay down without

Page 273

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

pulling back the covers, and closed her eyes. Something danced on the inside of her

lids. Shapes formed, dispersed and reformed. None of them made the least sense: they

were splashes and sprawls, a lunatic's graffiti. She watched them with her mind's

eye, mesmerized by their fluent transformations, scarcely aware in her

fascination

that the invisible fingers had found her neck again and were
insinuating themselves

into her substance with all the subtle efficiency of a good masseur.

And then sleep.

She didn't hear the dogs begin to bark: Marty did. At first just a
solitary barking,

somewhere off to the southeast of the house, but the alarm call was
almost

immediately taken up by a volley of other voices.

He got up boozily from in front of the dead television and went back
to the

window.

A wind had got up. It had probably blown some dead branch down,
which had

disturbed the dogs. He'd noticed several dead elms that needed felling
in the corner

of the estate; probably one of those was the culprit. Still, he'd better
look. He

went through to the kitchen, and turned on the video screens, flicking
from camera

to camera along the perimeter fence. There was nothing to see. As he
flipped to the

cameras just east of the woods, however, the pictures disappeared.
White noise

replaced the sight of floodlit grass. Three cameras were out of action
in all.

"Shit," he said. If a tree were down, and that became a likelier option than

ever if the cameras weren't working, he'd have a clearing-up job on his hands. It

was odd that the alarms hadn't started, though. Any fall that had incapacitated

three cameras must have breached the fence's systems: yet no bells rang, no sirens

wailed. He took his anorak off the hook beside the back door, picked up a

flashlight, and went outside.

The fence lights glimmered at the periphery of his vision; scanning them

quickly he could see none that were out. He set off toward the racket of dogs. It

was a balmy night, despite the wind: the first confident warmth of spring. He was

glad to be going on a walkabout, even if it was a fool's errand. It might not even

be a tree at all; simply an electrical fault. Nothing was infallible. The house fell

away behind him, the lit windows diminished. Now, all around him, darkness. He was

isolated for two hundred yards between the lights of the fence and those of the

house, a strip of no-man's-land over which he stumbled, flashlight inefficiently

lighting the turf a few strides ahead of him. In the woods, the wind found an

occasional voice; otherwise there was silence.

Eventually he reached the fence where he approximated the noise of the dogs

to have come from. All the lights in either direction were working: there was no

visible sign of disturbance. Despite the reassuring correctness of the scene,

something about it, about the night and the balmy wind, felt odd. Maybe the dark

wasn't so benign after all, the warmth in the air not entirely natural for the

season. A tick had begun in his stomach, and his bladder was heavy with beer. It was

vexing that there were no dogs to be seen or heard. Either he'd made an error of

judgment in approximating their position or they'd moved from the spot, pursuing.

Or, the absurd thought came, pursued.

The lamps in the uprights of the fence rocked their hooded heads in a fresh

gust of wind; the scene danced giddily in the pitching light. He decided he could go

no further without relieving his aching bladder. He turned off the flashlight,

pocketed it, and unzipped, back to the fence and the light. It was a great relief to

piss into the grass; the physical satisfaction made him whoop.

Halfway through, the lights behind him flickered. At first he thought it

was

simply a trick of the wind. But no, they were actually dimming. Even as they faded,

along the perimeter to his right the dogs began again, anger and panic in their

voices.

He couldn't stop peeing once he'd started, and for valuable seconds he

cursed his lack of bladder control. When he was done he zipped up and started to run

in the direction of the din. As he went, the lights came back on again, falteringly,

their circuits buzzing as they did so. But they were set too infrequently along the

line of the fence to offer much reassurance. Between them, patches of darkness

sprawled, so that for one pace out of every ten all was clarity, for the other nine,

night. Despite the fear clutching at his gut he ran all-out, the fence flickering

past him. Light, darkness, light, darkness-

Ahead, a tableau resolved itself. An intruder was standing on the far side

of a light pool thrown down by one of the lamps. The dogs were everywhere, at his

Page 274

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

heels, at his chest, snapping and tearing at him. The man was still

standing

upright, legs apart, while they milled around him.

Marty now realized how close he was to witnessing a massacre. The dogs were

berserk, tearing at the intruder with all the fury they could muster. Curiously,

despite the venom in their attack, their tails were between their legs, and their

low growls, as they circled looking for another opening, were unmistakably fearful.

Job, he saw, was not even attempting to pounce: he slunk around, his eyes closed to

slits, watching the heroics of the rest.

Marty started calling them off by name, using the strong, simple commands

Lillian had taught him.

"Stand! Saul! Stand! Dido!"

The dogs were immaculately tutored: he'd seen them put through these

exercises a dozen times. Now, despite the intensity of their anger, they relinquished their victim when they heard the command. Reluctantly they fell back,

ears flattened, teeth exposed, eyes clamped on the man.

Marty started to walk steadily toward the intruder, who was left standing in

a ring of watchful dogs, reeling and bloody. He carried no visible weapon; indeed he

looked more like a derelict than a would-be assassin. His plain dark jacket was torn

in a dozen places by the attack, and where his skin was exposed blood shone.

"Keep them . . . off me," he said, his voice wounded. There were bites all

over his body. In some places, particularly his legs, pieces of his flesh had been

ripped away. The middle finger of his left hand had been bitten through at the

second joint, and was depending by a thread of sinew. Blood splashed on the grass.

It amazed Marty that the man was even standing upright.

The dogs still circled him, ready to renew the assault if and when the order

were granted; one or two of them glanced at Marty impatiently. They were itching to

finish their wounded victim off. But the derelict wouldn't grant them a sign of his

fear. He only had eyes for Marty, and those eyes were pinpricks in livid white.

"Don't move," Marty said, "if you want to remain alive. If you try to run

they'll bring you down. Do you understand? I haven't got that much control over

them."

The other said nothing; simply stared. His agony, Marty knew, must be acute.

He wasn't even a young man. His uneven growth of stubble showed more gray than

black. The skull behind the lax and waxen flesh was severe, the features set on it

used and weary: tragic even. His suffering was only apparent in the greasy sheen of

his skin, and the fixedness of his facial muscles. His stare had the stillness of a

hurricane's eye, and its menace.

"How did you get in?" Marty asked.

"Get them away," the man said. He spoke as if he expected to be obeyed.

"Come back to the house with me."

The other shook his head, unwilling even to debate the possibility.

"Get them away," he said again.

Marty conceded to the other's authority, though not certain why. He called

the dogs to him by name. They came to heel with rebuking looks, unhappy to surrender

their prize.

"Now come back to the house," Marty said.

"No need."

"You'll bleed to death, for God's sake."

"I loathe dogs," the man said, still not taking his eyes off Marty. "We both

do."

Marty hadn't time to think clearly about what the man was saying; he just

wanted to stop the situation from escalating again. Blood loss had surely weakened

the man. If he fell down Marty wasn't certain he could prevent the dogs from going

in for the kill. They were around his legs, glancing up at him irritably; their

breath was hot on him.

"If you don't come on your own accord, I'll take you."

"No." The intruder raised his injured hand to chest height and glanced down

at it. "I don't need your kindnesses, thank you," he said.

He bit down on the sinew of the mutilated finger, as a seamstress might

through a thread. The discarded joints fell to the grass. Then he clenched his

seeping hand into a fist, and thrust it into his ravaged jacket.

Marty said: "Christ Almighty." Suddenly the lights along the fence were

flickering again. Only this time they went out altogether. In the sudden pitch, Saul

whined. Marty knew the dog's voice, and shared his apprehension.

Page 275

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"What's happening, boy?" he asked the dog, wishing to God it could reply.

And then the dark broke; something lit the scene that was neither electricity nor

starlight. The intruder was the source. He'd begun to burn with a faint luminescence. Light was dripping from his fingertips and oozing from the bloody

holes in his coat. It enveloped his head in a flickering gray halo that consumed

neither flesh nor bone, the light licking out of mouth and eyes and nostrils. Now it

began to take on shapes, or seemed to. It was all seems. Phantoms sprang from the

flux of light. Marty glimpsed dogs, then a woman, then a face; all, and yet perhaps

none of these, a flurry of apparitions that transformed before they congealed. And

in the center of these momentary phenomena the intruder's eyes stared on at Marty:

clear and cold.

Then, without a comprehensible cue, the entertainment took on a different

tone altogether. A look of anguish slid across the fabricator's face; a drool of

bloody darkness spilled from his eyes, extinguishing whatever played in the vapor,

leaving only bright worms of fire to trace his skull. Then they too went out, and

just as suddenly as the illusions had appeared, they were gone, and there was just a

torn man standing beside the humming fence.

The lights were coming back on again, their illumination so flat it drained

any last vestige of magic. Marty looked at the bland flesh, the empty eyes, the

sheer drabness of the figure in front of him and believed none of it

"Tell Joseph," said the intruder.

-it had all been trickery of some kind-

"Tell him what?"

"That I was here."

-but if it was just trickery, why didn't he step forward and apprehend the

man?

"Who are you?" he asked.

"Just tell him. "

Marty nodded; he had no courage left in him

"Then, go home."

"Home?"

"Away from here," the intruder said. "Out of harm's way."

He turned from Marty and the dogs, and as he did so the lights faltered and

failed for several dozen yards in either direction.

When they came back on again, the magician had gone.

"Is that all he said?"

As ever, Whitehead had his back to Marty as he spoke, and it was Impossible

to gauge his response to the account of the night's events. Marty had offered a

carefully doctored description of what had actually happened. He'd told Whitehead

about his hearing the dogs and about the chase and the brief conversation he'd had

with the intruder. What he'd left out was the part that he couldn't explain: the

images the man had seemingly conjured from his body. That he made no attempt to

describe, or even report. He'd simply told the old man that the lights along the

fence had failed and that under the cover of darkness the intruder had made off. It

made a lame finale to the encounter but he had no powers to improve on his story.

His mind, still juggling the visions of the previous night, was too uncertain of

objective truth to contemplate a more elaborate lie.

He hadn't slept for over twenty-four hours now. He'd spent the bulk of the

night checking the perimeter, scouring the fence for the place the intruder had

breached. There was no break in the wire, however. Either the man had slipped into

the grounds when the gates were opened for one of the guests' cars, which was

plausible; or else he had scaled the fence, disregarding an electric charge that

would have struck most men dead. Having seen the tricks the man was capable of Marty

was not about to discount this second scenario. After all, this same man had

rendered the alarms inoperative-and somehow drained the lights of power along the

stretch of fence. How he'd achieved these feats was anybody's guess. Certainly scant

minutes after the man's disappearance the entire system was fully operational again:

the alarms working and the cameras functioning all around the boundary.

Once he'd checked the fences thoroughly, he'd gone back into the house and

sat in the kitchen to reconstruct every detail of what he'd just experienced. About

four in the morning he'd heard the dinner party break up: laughter, the slamming of

car doors. He'd made no move to report the break-in then and there. There was, he

Page 276

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

reasoned, no use in souring Whitehead's evening. He just sat and listened to the

noise of people at the other end of the house. Their voices were incoherent smears;

as if he were underground, and they above. And while he listened, drained after his

adrenaline high, memories of the man at the fence flickered in front of him.

He told none of this to Whitehead. Just the plainest outline of events, and

those few words: "Tell him that I was here." It was enough.

"Was he badly hurt?" Whitehead said, not turning from the window.

"He lost a finger, as I said. And he was bleeding pretty badly."

"In pain, would you say?"

Marty hesitated before replying. Pain was not the word he wanted to employ;

not pain as he understood it. But if he used some other word, like anguish-something

that hinted at the gulfs behind the glacial eyes-he risked trespass into areas he

was not prepared to go; especially not with Whitehead. He was certain that if he

once let the old man sense any ambivalence, the knives would be out. So he replied:

"Yes. He was in pain."

"And you say he bit the finger off?"

"Yes."

"Maybe you'd look for it later."

"I have. I think one of the dogs must have taken it."

Did Whitehead chuckle to himself? It sounded so.

"Don't you believe me?" Marty said, taking the laughter to be at his expense.

"Of course I believe you. It was only a matter of time before he came."

"You know who he is?"

"Yes."

"Then you can have him arrested."

The private amusement had stopped. The words that followed were colorless.

"This is no conventional trespasser, Strauss, as I'm sure you're aware. The

man is a professional assassin of the first rank. He came here with the express

purpose of killing me. With your intervention, and that of the dogs, he was

prevented. But he will try again."

"All the more reason to have him found, sir."

"No police force in Europe could locate him."

"-if he's a known assassin-" Marty said, pressing the point. His refusal to

let this bone go until he had the marrow from it had begun to irritate the old man.

He growled his reply.

"He's known to me. Perhaps to a few others who have encountered

him down the

years . . . but that's all."

Whitehead crossed from the window to his desk, unlocked it, and brought out

something wrapped in cloth. He laid it on the polished desk-top and unwrapped it. It

was a gun.

"You'll carry this with you at all times in future," he told Marty. "Pick it

up. It won't bite."

Marty took the gun from the desk. It was cold and heavy.

"Have no hesitation, Strauss. This man is lethal."

Marty passed the gun from hand to hand; it felt ugly.

"Problem?" Whitehead inquired.

Marty chewed on his words before speaking them. "It's only . . . well, I'm

on parole, sir. I'm supposed to be obeying the letter of the law. Now You give me a

gun, and tell me to shoot on sight. I mean, I'm sure you're right about him being an

assassin, but I don't think he was even armed."

Whitehead's expression, hitherto impartial, changed as Marty spoke. His

teeth showed yellow as he snapped his reply.

"You're my property, Strauss. You concern yourself with me, or you get to

Hell out of here tomorrow morning. Me!" He jabbed finger at his own chest. "Not

yourself. Forget yourself."

Marty swallowed a throatful of possible retorts: none were polite.

"You want to go back to Wandsworth?" the old man said. All signs of anger

had disappeared; the yellow teeth were sheathed. "Do you?"

"No. Of course not."

"You can go if you want. Just say the word."

"I said no! . . . Sir."

"Then you listen," the old man said. "The man you met last night means me

harm. He came here to kill me. If he comes again-and he will-I want you to return

Page 277

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

the compliment. Then we'll see, won't we, boy?"-the teeth showed again, a fox's

smile. "Oh, yes . . . we'll see."

Carys woke feeling seedy. At first she remembered nothing of the previous night, but

she gradually began to recall the bad trip that she'd undergone: the room like a

living thing, the phantom fingertips that had plucked-oh, so gently-at the hairs on

the nape of her neck.

She couldn't remember what had happened when the fingers had delved too

deep. Had she lain down, was that it? Yes, now she remembered, she had lain down. It

was only then, when her head hit the pillow and sleep claimed her, that the bad

times had really begun.

Not dreams: at least not like she'd had before. There'd been no theatrics,

no symbols, no fugitive memories weaving between the horrors. There had been nothing

at all: and that had been (still was) the terror. She had been delivered into a

void.

"Void."

It was just a dead word when she spoke it aloud: it didn't begin to describe

the place she'd discovered; its emptiness more immaculate, the terrors it awoke more

atrocious, the hope of salvation in its deeps more fragile than in any place she had

ever guessed at. It was a legendary Nowhere, beside which every other dark was

blindingly bright, every other despair she had endured a mere flirtation with the

pit, not the pit itself.

Its architect had been there too. She remembered something of his mild

physiognomy, which had convinced her not a jot. See how extraordinary this emptiness

is, he had boasted; how pure, how absolute? A world of marvels can't compare, can

never hope to compare, with such sublime nothingness.

And when she awoke the boasts remained. It was as if the vision were true,

while the reality she now occupied was a fiction. As if color and shape and

substance were pretty distractions designed to paste over the fact of this emptiness

he had shown her. Now she waited, scarcely aware of time passing, occasionally

stroking the sheet or feeling the weave of the carpet under her bare feet, waiting

in despair for the moment it all peeled back and the void appeared again to devour

her.

Well, she thought, I'll go to the sunshine island. If ever she deserved to

play there awhile, she deserved it now, having suffered so much. But something

soured the thought. Wasn't the island a fiction too? If she went there now, wasn't

she weaker next time the architect came, void in hand? Her heart started to beat

very loudly in her ears. Who was there to help her? Nobody who understood. Just

Pearl, with her accusing eyes and her sly contempt; and Whitehead,

content to feed

her H as long as it kept her compliant; and Marty, her runner, sweet in his way, but

so naively pragmatic she could never begin to explain the complexities of the

dimensions she lived in. He was a one-world man; he would look at her bewildered,

trying to understand, and failing.

No; she had no guides, no signposts. It would be better if she went back the

way she knew. Back to the island.

It was a chemical lie, and it killed with time; but life killed in time,

didn't it? And if dying was all there was, didn't it make sense to go to it happy

rather than fester in a dirty hole of a world where the void whispered at every

corner? So when Pearl came upstairs with her H, she took it, thanked her politely,

and went to the island, dancing.

28

Fear could make the world go round if its wheels were efficiently oiled. Marty had

seen the system in practice at Wandsworth: a hierarchy built upon fear. It was

violent, unstable and unjust, but perfectly workable.

Seeing Whitehead, the calm, still center of his universe, so changed by

fear, so sweaty, so full of panic, had come as an unwelcome shock.
Marty had no

personal feelings for the old man-or none that he was aware of-but
he'd seen

Whitehead's species of integrity at work, and had profited by it. Now,
he felt, the

stability he had come to enjoy was threatened with extinction.
Already the old man

was clearly withholding information-perhaps pivotal to Marty's
understanding of the

situation-about the intruder and his motives. In place of Whitehead's
previous plain

talking, there was innuendo and threats. That was his prerogative, of
course. But it

left Marty with a guessing game on his hands.

Page 278

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

One point was unarguable: whatever Whitehead claimed, the man at
the fence

had been no conventional hired killer. Several inexplicable things had
happened at

the fence. The lights had waxed and waned as if on cue; the cameras
had mysteriously

failed when the man had appeared. The dogs had registered this riddle
too. Why else

had they shown such a confusion of anger and apprehension? And
there remained the

illusions-those air-burning pictures. No sleight of hand, however

elaborate, could

explain them satisfactorily. If Whitehead knew this "assassin" as well as he

claimed, then he must know the man's skills too: he was simply too afraid to talk

about them.

Marty spent the day asking the discreetest of questions around the house but

it rapidly became apparent that Whitehead had said nothing of the events to Pearl,

Lillian or Luther. This was odd. Surely now was the very time to make everyone more

vigilant? The only person to suggest he had any knowledge of the night's events was

Bill Toy, but when Marty raised the subject he was evasive.

"I realize you've been put in a difficult situation, Marty, but so are we all at the moment."

"I just feel I could do the job better-"

"-if you knew the facts."

"Yes."

"Well, I think you have to concede that Joe knows best." He made a rueful

face. "We should all have that tattooed on our hands, don't you think? Joe Knows

Best. I wish I could tell more. I wish I knew more. I think it's probably easiest

for all concerned if you let the matter drop."

"He gave me a gun, Bill."

"I know."

"And he told me to use it."

Toy nodded; he looked pained by all of this, even regretful.

"These are bad times, Marty. We're all . . . all having to do a lot of things we don't want to, believe me."

Marty did believe him; he trusted Toy sufficiently to know that if there'd

been anything he could say on the subject, it would have been said. It was entirely

possible that Toy didn't even know who had broken the seal on the Sanctuary. If it

was some private confrontation between Whitehead and the stranger, then maybe a full

explanation could only come from the old man himself, and that would clearly not be

forthcoming.

Marty had one final interviewee. Carys.

He hadn't seen her since he'd trespassed on the upper landing the day before. What he'd seen between Carys and her father had unsettled him, and there

was, he knew, a childish urge in him to punish her by withholding his company. Now

he felt obliged to seek her out, however uncomfortable the meeting might prove.

He found her that afternoon, loitering in the vicinity of the dovecote.
She

was wrapped up in a fur coat that looked as if it had been bought at a
thrift shop;

it was several sizes too big for her, and moth-eaten. As it was, she
seemed

overdressed. The weather was warm even if the wind was gusty, and
the clouds that

passed across a Wedgwood-blue sky carried little threat: too small, too
white. They

were April clouds, containing at worst a light shower.

"Carys."

She fixed him with eyes so ringed with tiredness his first thought was
that

they were bruised. In her hand she had a bundle, rather than a bunch,
of flowers,

many still buds.

"Smell," she said, proffering them.

He sniffed at them. They were practically scentless: they just smelled
of

eagerness and earth.

"Can't smell much."

"Good," she said. "I thought I was losing my senses."

She let the bundle drop to the ground, impatient with them.

"You don't mind if I interrupt, do you?"

She shook her head. "Interrupt all you like," she replied. The

strangeness

of her manner struck him more forcibly than ever; she always spoke as though she had

some private joke on her mind. He longed to join in the game, to learn her secret

language, but she seemed so sealed up, an anchorite behind a wall of sly smiles.

"I suppose you heard the dogs last night," he said.

"I don't remember," she replied, frowning. "Maybe."

"Did anybody say anything to you about it?"

Page 279

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"Why should they?"

"I don't know. I just thought-"

She put him out of his discomfort with a fierce little nod of her head.

"Yes, if you want to know. Pearl told me there's been an intruder. And you

scared him off, is that right? You and the dogs."

"Me and the dogs."

"And which of you bit off his finger?"

Had Pearl told her about the finger too, or was it the old man who'd vouchsafed that vicious detail? Had they been together today, in her room? He

canceled the scene before it flared up in his head.

"Did Pearl tell you that?" he said.

"I haven't seen the old man," she replied, "if that's what you're driving at.

His thought encapsulated; it was eerie. She even used his phraseology. "The

old man," she called him, not "Papa."

"Shall we walk down to the lake?" she suggested, not really seeming to care

one way or the other.

"Sure."

"You were right about the dovecote, you know," she said. "It's ugly when

it's empty like this. I never thought of it like that before." The image of the

deserted dovecote genuinely seemed to unnerve her. She shivered, even in the thick

coat.

"Did you run today?" she asked.

"No. I was too tired."

"Was it that bad?"

"Was what that bad?"

"Last night."

He didn't know how to begin to answer. Yes, of course, it had been bad, but

even if he trusted her enough to describe the illusion he'd seen-and he

was by no

means sure he did-his vocabulary was woefully inadequate.

Carys paused as they came in sight of the lake. Small white flowers starred

the grass beneath their feet, Marty didn't know their names. She studied them as she

said:

"Is it just another prison, Marty?"

"What?"

"Being here."

She had her father's skill with non sequiturs. He hadn't anticipated the

question at all, and it threw him. Nobody had really asked him how he'd felt since

arriving. Certainly not beyond a superficial inquiry as to his comfort. Perhaps

consequently he hadn't really bothered to ask himself. His answer-when it came-came

haltingly.

"Yes . . . I suppose it's still a prison, I hadn't really thought . . . I

mean, I can't just up and leave anytime I want to, can I? But it doesn't compare . .

. with, Wandsworth"-again, his vocabulary failed him-"this is just another world."

He wanted to say he loved the trees, the size of the sky, the white florets

they stepped through as they walked, but he knew such utterances

would sound leaden

out of his mouth. He hadn't got the knack of that kind of talk: not like Flynn, who

could babble instant poetry as though it were a second tongue. Irish blood, he used

to claim, to explain this loquacity. All Marty could say was: "I can run here."

She murmured something he failed to catch; perhaps just assent. Whatever,

his answer seemed to satisfy her, and he could feel the anger he'd started out with,

the resentment at her clever talk and her secret life with Papa, dissolving.

"Do you play tennis?" she asked, again out of nowhere.

"No; I never have."

"Like to learn?" she suggested, half-looking around at him and grinning. "I

could teach you. When the weather gets warmer."

She looked too frail for any strenuous exercise; living on the edge all the

time seemed to weary her, though on the edge of what he didn't know.

"You teach me: I'll play," he said, happy with the bargain.

"That's a deal?" she asked.

"A deal."

-and her eyes, he thought, are so dark; ambiguous eyes that dodge and skim

sometimes, and sometimes, when you least expect it, look at you with such directness

you're sure she's stripping your soul.

Page 280

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

-and he isn't handsome, she thought; he's too used to be that, and he runs

to keep himself fit because if he stopped he'd get flabby. He's probably a

narcissist: I bet he stands in front of the mirror every night and looks at himself

and wishes he was still a pretty-boy instead of being solid and somber.

She caught a thought from him, her mind reaching up, easily up, above her

head (this was the way she pictured it, at least) and snatching it out of the air.

She did it all the time-to Pearl, to her father-often forgetting that other people

lacked the skill to pry with such casualness.

The thought she had snatched was: I would have to learn to be gentle; that,

or something like it. He was afraid she'd bruise, for Christ's sake. That was why he

was all dammed up when he was with her, so circuitous in his dealings.

"I'm not going to break," she said, and a patch of skin at his neck blushed.

"I'm sorry," he answered. She wasn't sure if he was conceding his error or

simply hadn't understood her observation.

"There's no need to handle me with kid gloves. I don't want that from you. I

get it all the time."

He threw her a disconsolate glance. Why didn't he believe what she told him?

She waited, hoping for some clue, but none was offered, however tentative.

They'd come to the weir that fed the lake. It was high, and fast. People had

drowned in it, she'd been told, as recently as a couple of decades ago, just before

Papa had bought the estate. She started to explain all this, and about a coach and

horses that had been driven into the lake during a storm, telling him without

listening to herself, working out how to get past his courtesy and his machismo to

the part of him that might be of use to her.

"And the coach is still in there?" he asked, staring into the threshing water.

"Presumably," she said. The story had lost its charm already.

"Why don't you trust me?" she asked him straight out.

He didn't reply; but he was clearly struggling with something. The frown of

puzzlement he displayed deepened to dismay. Damn, she thought, I've really spoiled

things somehow. But it was done. She'd asked him outright, and she was ready to take

the bad news, whatever it was.

Almost without planning the theft, she stole another thought from him, and

it was shockingly clear: like living it. Through his eyes she saw the door of her

bedroom, and her lying on the bed beyond it, glassy-eyed, with Papa sitting close

by. When was this, she wondered? Yesterday? The day before? Had he heard them

talking about it; was that what woke such distaste in him? He'd played the

detective, and he hadn't liked what he'd discovered.

"I'm not very good with people," he said, answering her question about trust. "I never have been."

How he squirmed rather than tell the truth. He was being obscenely polite

with her. She wanted to wring his neck.

"You spied on us," she said with brutal plainness. "That's all it is, isn't it? You saw Papa and me together-"

She tried to frame the remark as if it were a wild guess. It didn't quite convince as such, and she knew it. But what the hell? It was said now, and he would

have to invent his own reasons as to how she'd reached that conclusion.

"What did you overhear?" she demanded, but got no response. It wasn't anger

that tongue-tied him, but shame for his peeping. The blushing had infected his face

from ear to ear.

"He treats you like he owns you," he murmured, not taking his eyes off the

roiling water.

"He does, in a way."

"Why?"

"I'm all he's got. He's alone . . ."

"Yes."

". . . and afraid."

"Does he ever let you leave the Sanctuary?"

"I've got no desire to go," she said. "I've got all I want here."

He wanted to ask her what she did for bed companions, but he'd embarrassed

himself enough as it was. She found the thought anyway, and fast upon the thought,

the image of Whitehead leaning forward to kiss her. Perhaps it was more than a

fatherly kiss. Though she tried not to think of that possibility too often, she

could not avoid its presence. Marty was more acute than she'd given

him credit for;

Page 281

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

he'd caught that subtext, subtle as it was.

"I don't trust him," he said. He took his gaze off the water to look around

at her. His bewilderment was perfectly apparent.

"I know how to handle him," she replied. "I've made a bargain with him. He

understands bargains. He gets me to stay with him, and I get what I want."

"Which is?"

Now she looked away. The spume off the whipping water was a grubby brown. "A

little sunshine," she finally replied.

"I thought that came free," Marty said, puzzled.

"Not the way I like it," she answered. What did he want from her? Apologies?

If so, he'd be disappointed.

"I should get back to the house," he said.

Suddenly, she said: "Don't hate me, Marty."

"I don't," he came back.

"There's a lot of us the same."

"The same?"

"Belonging to him."

Another ugly truth. She was positively brimful of them today.

"You could get the hell out of here if you really wanted to, couldn't you?"

he said, peevishly.

She nodded. "I suppose I could. But where?"

The question made no sense to him. There was an entire world outside the

fences, and she surely didn't lack the finances to explore it, not Joseph

Whitehead's daughter. Did she really find the prospect so stale? They made such a

strange pair. He with his experience so unnaturally abbreviated-years of his life

wasted-and now anxious to make up for lost time. She, so apathetic, fatigued by the

very thought of escape from her self-defined prison.

"You could go anywhere," he said.

"That's as good as nowhere," she replied flatly; it was a destination that

remained much on her mind. She glanced across at him, hoping some light would have

dawned but he didn't show a glimmer of comprehension.

"Never mind," she said.

"Are you coming?"

"No, I think I'll stay here for a while."

"Don't throw yourself in."

"Can't swim, eh?" she replied, testily. He frowned, not understanding.

"Doesn't matter. I never took you for a hero."

He left her standing inches from the edge of the bank, watching the water.

What he'd told her was true; he wasn't good with people. But with women, he was even

worse. He should have taken the cloth, the way his mother had always wanted him to.

That would have solved the problem; except that he had no grasp of religion either,

and never had. Maybe that was part of the problem between him and the girl: they

neither of them believed a damn thing. There was nothing to say, there were no

issues to debate. He glanced around. Carys had walked a short way along the bank

from the spot where he'd left her. The sun glared off the skin of the water and

burned into her outline. It was almost as if she wasn't real at all.

Part Three

DEUCE

deuce¹ n. The two at dice or cards;

(Tennis) state of score (40 all, games all)

at which either party must gain two consecutive

points or games to win.

deuce2 n. Plague, mischief; the Devil.

V.

Superstition

29

Less than a week after the talk at the weir, the first hairline cracks began to

appear in the pillars of the Whitehead Empire. They rapidly widened. Spontaneous

Page 282

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

selling began on the world's stock markets, a sudden failure of faith in the

Empire's credibility. Crippling losses in share values soon mounted. The selling

fever, once contracted, appeared well-nigh incurable

In the space of a day there were more visitors to the estate than Marty had

ever seen before. Among them, of course, the familiar faces. But this time there

were dozens of others, financial analysts, he presumed. Japanese and European

visitors mingled with the English, until the place rang with more accents than the

United Nations.

The kitchen, much to Pearl's irritation, became an impromptu meeting place

for those not immediately required at the great man's hand. They gathered around the

large table, demanding coffee in endless supply, to debate the strategies they had

congregated here to formulate. Much of their debating, as ever, was lost on Marty,

but it was clear from the snippets he overheard that the corporation was facing no

explicable emergency. There were falls of staggering proportions happening

everywhere; talk of government intervention to prevent imminent collapse in Germany

and Sweden; talk too of the sabotage that had instigated this catastrophe. It seemed

to be the conventional wisdom among these prophets that only an elaborate plan-one

that had been in preparation for several years-could have damaged the fortunes of

the corporation so fundamentally. There were murmurs of secret government

interference; of a conspiracy of the competition. The paranoia in the house knew no

bounds.

There was something about the way these men fretted and fought, hands

carving up the air in their efforts to contradict the previous speaker's remarks,

that struck Marty as absurd. After all, they never saw the billions they lost and

gained, or the people whose lives they so casually rearranged. It was all an

abstraction; numbers in their heads. Marty couldn't see the use of it. To have power

over notional fortunes was just a dream of power, not power itself.

On the third day, with everyone drained of gambits, and praying now for a

resurrection that showed no sign of coming, Marty encountered Bill Toy, engaged in a

heated debate with Dwoskin. To his surprise Toy, seeing Marty passing by, called him

across, cutting the conversation short. Dwoskin hurried away scowling, leaving Toy

and Marty to talk.

"Well, stranger," said Toy, "and how are you doing?"

"I'm OK," Marty said. Toy looked as if he hadn't slept in a long while. "And

you?"

"I'll survive."

"Any idea of what's going on?"

Toy offered a wry smile. "Not really," he said, "I've never been a moneyman.

Hate the breed. Weasels."

"Everyone's saying it's a disaster."

"Oh, yes," he said with equanimity, "I think it probably is."

Marty's face fell. He'd been hoping for some words of reassurance. Toy

caught his discomfort, and its origins. "Nothing terrible's going to happen," he

said, "as long as we stay levelheaded. You'll still be in a job, if that's what

you're worried about."

"It did cross my mind."

"Don't let it." Toy put his hand on Marty's shoulder. "If I thought things looked that bad, I'd tell you."

"I know. I just get jittery."

"Who doesn't?" Toy tightened his grip on Marty. "What say the two of us go

on the town when the worst of this is over?"

"I'd like to."

"Ever been to the Academy Casino?"

"Never had the money."

"I'll take you. We'll lose some of Joe's fortune for him, eh?"

"Sounds good to me."

The anxiety still lingered on Marty's face.

"Look," said Toy, "it's not your fight. You understand me? Whatever happens

from now on, it won't be your fault. We've made some mistakes along the way, and now

we've got to pay for them."

"Mistakes?"

"Sometimes people don't forgive, Marty."

"All this"-Marty spread a hand to take in the whole circus-"because people

don't forgive?"

Page 283

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"Take it from me. It's the best reason in the world."

It struck Marty that Toy had become an outsider of late; that he wasn't the

pivotal figure in the old man's worldview that he had been. Did that explain the

sour look that had crept across his weary face?

"Do you know who's responsible?" Marty asked.

"What do boxers know?" Toy said with an unmistakable trace of irony; and

Marty was suddenly certain the man knew everything.

The panic days stretched into a week without any sign of letup. The faces of the

advisers changed, but the smart suits and the smart talk remained the same. Despite

the influx of new people, Whitehead had become increasingly laxer with his security

arrangements. Marty was required to be with the old man less and less; the crisis

seemed to have put all thoughts of assassination out of Papa's head.

The period was not without its surprises. On the first Sunday

Curtsinger

took Marty aside and undertook a labored seduction speech that began with boxing,

moved laterally to the pleasures of intermale physicality, and ended up with a

straight cash offer. "Just half an hour; nothing elaborate." Marty had guessed what

was in the air several minutes before Curtsinger came clean, and had prepared a

suitably polite refusal. They parted amicably enough. Such diversions aside, it was

a listless time. The rhythm of the house had been broken, and it was impossible to

establish a fresh one. The only way Marty could preserve his sanity was by keeping

out of the house as much as he could. He ran a great deal that week, often chasing

his tail around and around the perimeter of the estate until an exhaustion fugue set

in, and he could go back to his room, threading his way through the well-dressed

dummies who loitered in every corridor. Upstairs, behind a door that he happily

locked (to keep them out, not to keep himself in) he would shower and sleep for long

hours the deep, dreamless sleep he enjoyed.

Carys had no such liberty. Since the night the dogs had found Mamoulia she had

taken it into her head, on occasion, to play the spy. Why this was, she wasn't

certain. She'd never been much interested in goings-on at the Sanctuary. Indeed

she'd actively avoided contact with Luther, and Curtsinger, and all the rest of her

father's cohorts. Now, however, strange imperatives stirred her without warning: to

go into the library, or into the kitchen or the garden, and simply watch. She got no

pleasure out of this activity. Much that she heard she found impossible to

understand; much more was simply the vacuous gossip of financial fishwives.

Nevertheless she would sit for hours, until some vague appetite was satisfied, and

then she'd move on, perhaps to listen in on another debate. Some of the

conversationalists knew who she was; to those who didn't she offered the plainest of

introductions. Once her credentials had been established nobody questioned her

presence.

She also went to see Lillian and the dogs at that dispiriting compound

behind the house. It wasn't because she liked the animals, she simply felt impelled

to see them, for the sake of seeing; to look at the locks and the cages and at the

pups playing around their mother. In her mind she charted the position of the

kennels relative to the fence and to the house, pacing it out in case she needed to

find them in the dark. Why she would ever need that facility escaped her.

In these trips she was careful not to be seen by Martin, or Toy, or worst of

all, her father. It was a game she was playing, though its precise purpose was a

mystery. Maybe she was making a map of the place. Was that why she walked from one

end of the house to the other several times, checking and rechecking its geography,

working out the length of the corridors, memorizing the way the rooms let on to each

other? Whatever the reason, this foolish business answered some unspoken need in

her, and when it was done, and only then, would that need pronounce itself

satisfied, and let her be for a while. By the end of the week she knew the house as

she never had before; she'd been in every room except that one room of her father's,

which was forbidden even to her. She had checked all the entrances and exits,

stairways and passages, with the thoroughness of a thief.

Strange days; strange nights. Was this insanity, she began to wonder?

On the second Sunday-eleven days into the crisis-Marty was summoned to the library.

Whitehead was there, looking somewhat tired perhaps, but not substantially cowed by

the enormous pressure he was under. He was dressed for the outdoors; the

fur-collared coat he'd worn the first day, on that symbolic visit to the kennels.

Page 284

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"I haven't left the house in several days, Marty," he announced, "and my

head's getting stale. I think we should take a walk, you and I."

"I'll fetch a jacket."

"Yes. And the gun."

They headed out the back way, avoiding the newly arrived delegations who

still thronged the stairs and hallway, waiting for access to the holy of holies.

It was a balmy day; the nineteenth of April. The shadows of light-headed

clouds passed across the lawn in dissolute troupes. "We'll go to the woods," the,

old man said, leading off. Marty walked a respectful couple of yards behind, acutely

aware that Whitehead had come out here to clear his mind, not to talk.

The woods were buzzing with activity. New growth poking through
the rot of

last year's fall; daredevil birds plummeting and rising between the
trees, courtship

voices on every other branch. They walked for several minutes,
following no

particular path, without Whitehead so much as looking up from his
boots. Out of

sight of the house and his disciples, he wore. the burden of siege more
nakedly.

Head bowed, he trudged between the trees, indifferent to birdsong
and leaf-burst

alike.

Marty was enjoying himself. Whenever he'd crossed this territory
before it

had been at a run. Now his pace was forcibly slowed, and details of
the woods became

apparent. The confusion of flowers underfoot, the fungi sprouting in
the damp places

between the roots: all delighted him. He picked up a selection of
pebbles as he

went. One bore the fossilized imprint of a fern. He thought of Carys
and of the

dovecote, and an unexpected longing for her lapped at the edges of his
consciousness. Having no reason to prevent its access, he let it come.

Once admitted, the weight of his feeling for her shocked him. He felt

conspired against; as though in the last few days his emotions had
worked in some

secret place in him, transforming mild interest in Carys into something deeper. He

had little chance to sort the phenomena out, however. When he glanced up from the

stone fern Whitehead had got a good way ahead of him. Putting thoughts of Carys

aside, he picked up his pace. Passages of sun and shadow moved through the trees as

the light clouds that had sat on the wind earlier gave way to heavier formations.

The wind had begun to chill; there was an occasional speckle of rain in it.

Whitehead had pulled his collar up. His hands were plunged into his pockets.

When Marty reached him, he was greeted with a question.

"Do you believe in God, Martin?"

The inquiry came out of nowhere. Unprepared for it, Marty could only answer,

"I don't know," which was, as answers to that question went, honest enough.

But Whitehead wanted more. His eyes glittered.

"I don't pray, if that's what you mean," Marty offered.

"Not even before your trial? A quick word with the Almighty?"

There was no humor, malicious or otherwise, in this interrogation. Again,

Marty answered as honestly as he could.

"I don't remember, exactly . . . I suppose I must have said something,

then,

yes." He paused Above them, the clouds passed over the sun. "Much good it did me."

"And, in prison?"

"No; I never prayed." He was sure of that. "Never once."

"But there were God-fearing men in Wandsworth, surely?"

Marty remembered Heseltine, with whom he'd shared a cell for a few weeks at

the beginning of his stretch. An old hand at prison, Tiny had spent more years

behind bars than out. Every night he'd murmur a bastardized version of the Lord's

Prayer into his pillow before he went to sleep-"Our Father, who are in Heaven, hello

be thy name"-not understanding the words or their significance, simply saying the

prayer by rote, as he had every night of his life, most probably, until the sense

was corrupted beyond salvation- "thine by the King Dome, thine by the Glory, fever

and fever, Amen."

Was that what Whitehead meant? Was there respect for a Maker, thanks for

Creation, or even some anticipation of Judgment in Heseltine's prayer?

"No," was Marty's reply. "Not really God-fearing. I mean, what's the use...?"

There was more where that thought came from, and Whitehead waited for it

with a vulture's patience. But the words sat on Marty's tongue, refusing to be

spoken. The old man prompted them.

"Why no use, Marty?"

"Because it's all down to accident, isn't it? I mean, everything's chance."

Page 285

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

Whitehead nodded, almost imperceptibly. There was a long silence between

them, until the old man said: "Do you know why I chose you, Martin?"

"Not really."

"Toy never said anything to you?"

"He told me he thought I could do the job."

"Well, a lot of people advised against me taking you. They thought you were

unsuitable, for a number of reasons we needn't go into. Even Toy wasn't certain. He

liked you, but he wasn't certain."

"But you employed me anyway?"

"Indeed we did."

Marty was beginning to find the cat-and-mouse game insufferable. He said:

"Now you're going to tell me why, right?"

"You're a gambler," Whitehead replied. Marty felt he'd known the answer long

before it was spoken. "You wouldn't have been in trouble at all, if you hadn't been

obliged to pay off large gaming debts. Am I right?"

"More or less."

"You spent every penny you earned. Or so your friends testified at the trial. Frittered it away."

"Not always. I had some big wins. Really big wins."

The look Whitehead gave Marty was scalpel-sharp.

"After all you've been through-all your disease has made you suffer-you

still talk about your big wins."

"I remember the best times, like anyone would," Marty replied defensively.

"Flukes. "

"No! I was good, damn it."

"Flukes, Martin. You said so yourself a moment ago. You said it was all

chance. How can you be good at anything that's accidental? That doesn't make sense,

does it?"

The man was right, at least superficially. But it wasn't as simple as he made it out to be, was it? It was all chance; he couldn't argue with

that basic

condition. But a sliver of Marty believed something else. What it was he believed,

he couldn't describe.

"Isn't that what you said?" Whitehead pressed. "That it was accident."

"It's not always like that."

"Some of us have chance on our side. Is that what you're saying? Some of us

have our fingers"-Whitehead's forefinger described a spinning circle"-on the wheel."

The circling finger stopped. In his mind's eye, Marty completed the image: the ball

jumped from hole to hole and found a niche, a number. Some winner yelped his

triumph.

"Not always," he said. "Just sometimes."

"Describe it. Describe how it feels."

Why not? Where was the harm?

"Sometimes it was just easy, you know, like taking sweets from a baby. I'd

go to a club and the chips would tingle, and I'd know, Jesus I'd know, I couldn't

fail to win."

Whitehead smiled.

"But you did fail," he reminded Marty, with courteous brutality. "You often

failed. You failed till you owed everything you had, and more besides."

"I was stupid. I played even when the chips didn't tingle, when I knew I was

on a losing streak."

"Why?"

Marty glowered.

"What do you want, a signed confession?" he snapped. "I was greedy, what do

you think? And I loved playing, even when I didn't have a chance of winning. I still

wanted to play."

"For the game's sake."

"I suppose so. Yes. For the game."

A look, impossibly complex, crossed Whitehead's face. There was regret in

it, and a terrible, aching loss; and more: incomprehension. Whitehead the master,

Whitehead the lord of all he surveyed, suddenly showed-all too briefly-another, more

accessible, face: that of a man confused to the point of despair.

"I wanted someone with your weaknesses," he explained now, and suddenly he was the

one doing the confessing. "Because sooner or later I believed a day like today would

come; and I'd have to ask you to take a risk with me."

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"What sort of risk?"

"Nothing so simple as a wheel, or a game of cards. I wish it were.
Then

maybe I could explain to you, instead of asking for an act of faith. But
it's so

complicated. And I'm tired."

"Bill said something-"

Whitehead broke in.

"Toy's left the estate. You won't be seeing him again."

"When did he go?"

"Earlier in the week. Relations between us have been deteriorating for
a

while." He caught Marty's dismay. "Don't fret about it. Your position
here is as

secure as it ever was. But you must trust me absolutely."

"Sir-"

"No affirmations of loyalty; they're wasted on me. Not because I don't
believe you're sincere. But I'm surrounded by people who tell me
whatever they think

I want to hear. That's how they keep their wives in furs and their sons
in cocaine."

His gloved fingers clawed at his bearded cheek as he spoke. "So few
honest people.

Toy was one. Evangeline, my wife, was another. But so very few. I just have to trust

to instinct; I have to blot out all the talk and follow what my head tells me. And

it trusts you, Martin."

Marty said nothing; just listened as Whitehead's voice became quieter, his

eyes so intense now a glance from them might have ignited tinder.

"If you stay with me-if you keep me safe-there's nothing you can't be or

have. Understand me? Nothing."

This was not the first time the old man had offered this seduction; but

circumstances had clearly changed since Marty first arrived at the Sanctuary. There

was more at risk now. "What's the worst that can happen?" he asked.

The mazed face had slackened: only the incendiary eyes still showed life.

"The worst?" Whitehead said. "Who knows the worst?" The burning eyes seemed

about to be extinguished by tears; he fought them. "I have seen such things. And

passed by them on the other side. Never thought . . . not once . . ."

A pattering announced rain; its soft percussion accompanied Whitehead as he

stumbled to speak. All his verbal skills had deserted him suddenly; he was bereft.

But something-a vast something-demanded to be said.

"Never thought . . . it would ever happen to me."

He bit back more words, and shook his head at his own absurdity.

"Will you help me?" he asked, in place of further explanation.

"Of course."

"Well," he replied. "We'll see, eh?"

Without warning he suddenly stepped past Marty and returned the way they'd

come. The jaunt was apparently over. For several minutes they walked as they had,

Whitehead taking the lead, with Marty trailing a discreet two yards behind. Just

before they came in sight of the house Whitehead spoke again. This time he didn't

break the rhythm of his step, but threw the inquiry over his shoulder. Just four

words.

"And the Devil, Marty?"

"What, sir?"

"The Devil. Did you ever pray to him?"

It was a joke. A little leaden maybe, but the old man's way of making light

of his confessional.

"Well, did you?"

"Once or twice," Marty answered, skirting a smile. As the words left his

lips Whitehead froze dead in his tracks, a hand outstretched behind him to check

Marty.

"Ssh."

Twenty yards ahead, arrested as it crossed their path, was a fox. It hadn't

seen its observers yet, but it could only be a matter of moments before their scent

reached its nostrils.

"Which way?" Whitehead hissed.

"What?"

"Which way will it run? A thousand pounds. Straight bet."

"I haven't got-" Marty began.

"Against a week's pay."

Marty began to smile. What was a week's pay? He couldn't spend it anyway.

"A thousand pounds says it runs to the right," said Whitehead.

Page 287

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

Marty hesitated.

"Quickly, man-"

"Done."

Even on the word, the animal caught their scent. Its ears pricked, its head

turned, and it saw them. For an instant it was too stupefied by surprise to move;

then it ran. For several yards it took off away from them along the path, not

veering to one side or the other, its heels kicking up dead leaves as it went. Then,

without warning, it sliced away into the cover of the trees, to the left. There was

no ambiguity about the victory.

"Well done," said Whitehead, pulling off his glove and extending his hand to

Marty. When he shook it, Marty felt it tingle like the chips had on a winning night.

By the time they got back, the rain was beginning to come on more heavily. A welcome

hush had descended on the house. Apparently Pearl, unable to bear the barbarians in

her kitchen any longer, had thrown a fit and left. Though she'd gone, the offending

parties seemed well chastened. Their babble was reduced to a murmur, and few of them

made any approach to Whitehead as he entered. Those few that did were quickly

slapped down. "Are you still here, Munrow?" he said to one devotee; to another, who

made the error of thrusting a sheaf of papers at him, he quietly suggested the man

"choke on them." They reached the study with the minimum of interruptions. Whitehead

unlocked the wall safe.

"You would prefer cash, I'm sure."

Marty studied the carpet. Though he'd won the bet fairly, he was embarrassed

by the payoff.

"Cash is fine," he murmured.

Whitehead counted out a wad of twenty-pound notes and handed them across.

"Enjoy," he said.

"Thank you."

"Don't thank me," Whitehead said. "It was a straight bet. I lost."

An awkward silence fell while Marty pocketed the money.

"Our talk . . ." the old man said, ". . . is in the strictest confidence, you understand?"

"Of course. I wouldn't."

Whitehead raised his hand to ward off his protestations.

"-The strictest confidence. My enemies have agents."

Marty nodded as though he understood. In a way, of course, he did. Perhaps

Whitehead suspected Luther or Pearl. Maybe even Toy, who was so abruptly persona non

grata.

"These people are responsible for the present fall in my fortunes. It's all

meticulously engineered." He shrugged, eyes like slits. God, Marty thought, I'd

never want to be on the wrong side of this man. "I don't fret about these things. If

they want to plan my ruin, let them. But I wouldn't like to think that my most

intimate feelings were available to them. Do you see?"

"They won't be."

"No." He pursed his lips; a cold kiss of satisfaction.

"You've seen something of Carys, I gather? Pearl says you spend time together, is that right?"

"Yes."

Whitehead came back with a tone of detachment that was patently fake.

"She seems stable much of the time, but essentially that's a performance.

I'm afraid she's not well, and hasn't been for several years. Of course she's seen

the best psychiatrists money can buy but I'm afraid it's done no good. Her mother

went the same way in the end."

"Are you telling me not to see her?"

Whitehead looked genuinely surprised.

"No, not at all. The companionship may be good for her. But please, bear in

mind she's a highly disturbed girl. Don't take her pronouncements too

seriously.

Half the time she doesn't know what she's saying. Well, I think that's it. You'd

better go and pay off your fox."

He laughed, gently.

"Clever fox," he said.

In the two and a half months Marty had been at the Sanctuary Whitehead had been an

iceberg. Now he had to think about revising that description. Today he'd glimpsed

Page 288

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

another man altogether: inarticulate, alone; talking of God and prayer. Not just

God. There had been that final question, the one he'd thrown away so carelessly:

"And the Devil? Did you ever pray to him?"

Marty felt he'd been handed a pile of jigsaw pieces, none of which seemed to

belong to the same portrait. Fragments of a dozen scenes: Whitehead resplendent

among his acolytes, or sitting at a window watching the night; Whitehead the

potentate, lord of all he surveyed, or betting like a drunken porter on the way a

fox might run.

This last fragment puzzled Marty the most. In it, he sensed, was a clue that

could unite these disparate images. He had the strangest feeling that the bet on the

fox had been fixed. Impossible, of course, and yet, and yet . . .
Suppose Whitehead

could put his finger on the wheel anytime he wanted to, so that even the petty

chance of a fox running to the right or left was available to him?
Could he know the

future before it happened-as that why the chips tingled, and fingers too?-or was he

shaping it?

An earlier self would have rejected these subtleties out of hand. But Marty

had changed. Being in the Sanctuary had changed him, Carys' ellipses had changed

him. In a hundred ways he was more complex than he'd been, and part of him longed

for a return to the clarity of black and white. But he knew damn well that such

simplicity was a lie. Experience was made up. of endless ambiguities-of motive, of

feeling, of cause and effect-and if he was to win under such circumstances, he had

to understand how those ambiguities worked.

No; not win. There was no winning and losing here: not in the way that he'd

understood before. The fox had run to the left, and he had a thousand pounds folded

in his pocket, but he felt none of the exhilaration he had when he'd won on the

horses, or at the casino. Just black bleeding into white, and vice versa, until he

scarcely knew right from wrong.

30

Toy had rung the estate in the middle of the afternoon, spoken to an irate Pearl,

who was just about to make her exit, and left a message for Marty to call him at the

Pimlico number. But Marty hadn't rung back. Toy wondered if Pearl had failed to pass

the message along, or if Whitehead had somehow intercepted it, and prevented a

return call being made. Whatever the reason, he hadn't spoken to Marty, and he felt

guilty about it. He'd promised to warn Strauss if events started to go badly awry.

Now they were. Nothing observable perhaps; the anxieties Toy was experiencing were

born out of instinct rather than fact. But Yvonne had taught him to trust his heart,

not his head. Things were going to fall down after all; and he hadn't warned Marty.

Perhaps that was why he was having such bad dreams, and waking with memories of

ugliness flitting in his head.

Not everyone survived being young. Some died early, victims of their own

hunger for life. Toy hadn't been such a victim, though he'd come perilously close.

Not that he'd known it at the time. He'd been too dazzled by the new pools he was

introduced into by Whitehead to see how lethal those waters could be. And he'd

obeyed the great man's wishes with such unquestioning zeal, hadn't he? Never once

had he balked at his duty, however criminal it might have seemed. Why should he be

surprised then if, after all these years these same crimes, so casually committed,

were in silent pursuit of him? That was why he lay now in a clammy sweat, with

Yvonne sleeping beside him, and one phrase circling his skull:

Mamouliau will come.

That was the only clear notion he had. The rest-thoughts of Marty, and

Whitehead-was a potpourri of shames and accusations. But that plain phrase-Mamouliau

will come-stood out in the dross of uncertainty as a fixed point to which all his

terrors adhered.

No apology would suffice. No humiliation would curb the Last European's

anger. Because Toy had been young, and a brute, and he'd had a wicked way with him.

Once upon a time, when he'd been too young to know better, he'd made Mamouliau

suffer, and the remorse he felt now came too late-twenty, thirty years too late-and

after all, hadn't he lived on the profits of his brutality all these years? Oh,

Jesus, he said in the unsteady rhythm of his breath, Jesus help me.

Afraid, and ready to admit to being afraid if it meant she'd comfort him,

he turned over and reached for Yvonne. She wasn't there. Her side of the bed was

cold.

He sat up, momentarily disorientated.

Page 289

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"Yvonne?"

The bedroom door was ajar, and the dimmest of lights from downstairs

described the room. It was chaos. They had been packing all evening, and the task

had still not been finished when, at one in the morning, they'd retired. Clothes

were heaped on the chest, of drawers; an open case yawned in the corner; his ties

hung over the back of a chair like parched snakes, tongues to the

floor.

He heard a noise on the landing. He knew Yvonne's padding step well. She'd

gone for a glass of apple juice, or a biscuit, the way she so often did. She

appeared at the door, in silhouette.

"Are you all right?" he asked her.

She murmured something like yes. He put his head back on the pillow.

"Hungry again," he said, letting his eyes close. "Always hungry." Cold air

seeped into the bed as she raised the sheet to slip in beside him.

"You left the light on downstairs," he chided, as sleep started to slide over him again. She didn't reply. Asleep already, probably: she was blessed with a

facility for instant unconsciousness. He turned to look at her in the semidarkness.

She wasn't snoring yet, but nor was she entirely silent. He listened more carefully,

his coiled innards jittery. It was a liquid sound she was making: as though

breathing through mud.

"Yvonne . . . are you all right?"

She didn't answer.

From her face, which was inches from his, the slushing sound went on. He

reached for the switch of the lamp above the bed, keeping his eyes on

the black mass

of Yvonne's head as he did so. Best to do this fast, he reasoned, before my

imagination gets the better of me. His fingers located the switch, fumbled with it,

then pressed the light on.

What was facing him on the pillow was not recognizably Yvonne.

He jabbered her name as he scrambled backward out of bed, eyes fixed on the

abomination beside him. How was it possible that she was alive enough to climb the

stairs and get into bed, to murmur yes to him as she had? The profundity of her

wounding had killed her, surely. Nobody could live skinned and boned like that.

She half-turned in the bed, eyes closed, as if rolling over in her sleep.

Then-horribly-she said his name. Her mouth didn't work as it had; blood greased the

word on its way. He couldn't bear to look anymore, or he'd scream, and that would

bring them-whomever did this-bring them howling at him with their scalpels already

wet. They were probably outside the door already; but nothing could induce him to

stay in the same room. Not with her performing slow gyrations on the bed, still

saying his name as she pulled up her nightdress.

He staggered out of the bedroom and onto the landing. To his surprise they

were not waiting for him there.

At the top of the stairs he hesitated. He was not a brave man; nor was he

foolish. Tomorrow he could mourn her: but for tonight she was simply gone from him,

and there was nothing to be done but preserve himself from whoever'd done this.

Whoever! Why didn't he admit the name to himself? Mamouliau was responsible: it had

his signature. And he was not alone. The European would never have laid his purged

hands on human flesh the way someone had on Yvonne; his squeamishness was legendary.

But it was he who'd given her that half-life to live after the murder was done. Only

Mamouliau was capable of that service.

And he would be waiting below now, wouldn't he, in the undersea world at the

bottom of the stairs? Waiting, as he'd waited so long, for Toy to traipse down to

join him.

"Go to Hell," Toy whispered to the dark below, and walked (the urge was to

run, but common sense counseled otherwise) along the landing toward the spare

bedroom. With every step he anticipated some move from the enemy, but none came. Not

until he reached the door of the bedroom anyway.

Then, as he turned the handle, he heard Yvonne's voice behind him:

"Willy . . ." The word was better formed than before.

For the briefest moment he felt his sanity in doubt. Was it possible that if

he turned now she would be standing at the bedroom door as disfigured as memory

suggested; or was that all a fever-dream?

"Where are you going?" she demanded to know.

Downstairs, somebody moved.

"Come back to bed."

Without turning to refuse her invitation, Toy pushed the door of the spare

Page 290

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

bedroom open, and as he did so he heard somebody start up the stairs behind him. The

footsteps were heavy; their owner eager.

There was no key in the lock to delay his pursuer, and no time to drag furniture in front of the door. Toy crossed the lightless bedroom in three strides,

threw open the French windows, and stepped onto the small wrought-iron balcony. It

grunted beneath his weight. He suspected it would not hold for long.

Below him, the garden was in darkness, but he had a fair idea of where the

flower beds lay, and where the paving stones. Without hesitation-the footsteps loud

at his back-he clambered over the balcony. His joints complained at this exertion,

and more so when he lowered himself over the other side until he was hanging by his

hands, suspended by a grip that was every second in danger of giving out.

A din in the room he'd left drew his glance; his pursuer, a bloated thug

with bloody hands and the eyes of something rabid, was in the room-was crossing now

toward the windows, growling his displeasure. Toy rocked his body as best he could,

praying to miss the paving he knew was directly beneath his bare feet and land in

the soft earth of the herbaceous border. There was little chance to fine-tune the

maneuver. He let go of the balustrade as the obesity reached the balcony, and for

what seemed a long time fell backward through space, the window diminishing above

him, until he landed, with no more injury than a bruising, among the geraniums

Yvonne had planted only the week before.

He got to his feet badly winded but intact, and ran down the moonlit

garden

to the back gate. It was padlocked, but he managed to climb over it with

ease-adrenaline firing his muscles. There was no sound of further pursuit, and when

he glanced back he could see the fat man was still at the French windows, watching

his escape as though lacking the initiative to follow. Sick with a sudden

excitement, he sprinted away down the narrow passage that led along the backs of all

the gardens, caring only to put distance between himself and the house.

It was only when he reached the street, its lamps starting to go out now as

dawn edged up-over the city, that he realized he was stark naked.

31

Marty had gone to bed a happy man. Though there was still much here he didn't

understand, much which the old man-despite his promises of explanations-seemed

pleased to keep obscured, finally none of that was his business. If Papa chose to

have secrets, so be it. Marty had been hired to look after him, and it appeared that

he was fulfilling that obligation to his employer's satisfaction. The results were

there in the intimacies the old man had shared with him, and in the

thousand pounds

beneath his pillow.

Euphoria prevented sleep: Marty's heart seemed to be beating at twice its

usual rate. He got up, slipped on his bathrobe, and tried a selection of videos to

take his mind off the day's events, but the boxing tapes depressed him; the,

pornography too. He wandered downstairs to the library, found a dog-eared space

opera, then slipped back to his room, making a detour to the kitchen for a beer.

Carys was in his room when he got back, dressed in jeans and a sweater,

barefoot. She looked frayed, older than her nineteen years. The smile she offered

him was too stage-managed to convince.

"You don't mind?" she said. "Only I heard you walking about."

"Don't you ever sleep?"

"Not often."

"Want some beer?"

"No thanks."

"Sit down," he said, throwing a pile of clothes off the single chair for

her. She deposited herself on the bed, however, leaving the chair for Marty.

"I have to talk to you," she said.

Marty laid down the book he'd chosen. On the cover a naked woman, her skin a

fluorescent green, emerged from an egg on a twin-sunned planet. Carys said:

"Do you know what's going on?"

"Going on? What do you mean?"

"Haven't you felt anything odd in the house?"

"Like what?"

Her mouth had found its favorite shape; corners turned down in exasperation.

"I don't know . . . it's difficult to describe."

"Try."

She hesitated, like a diver at the edge of a high board, then took the

Page 291

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

plunge.

"Do you know what a sensitive is?"

He shook his head.

"It's someone who can pick up waves. Thought waves."

"Mind reading."

"In a way."

He gave her a noncommittal look. "Is it something you can do?" he said.

"Not do. I don't do anything. It's more like it's done to me."

Marty leaned back in the chair, flummoxed.

"It's as though everything gets sticky. I can't shake it off. I hear people talking without them moving their lips. Most of it's meaningless: just rubbish."

"And it's what they're thinking?"

"Yes."

He couldn't find much to say in response, except that he doubted her, and

that wasn't what she wanted to hear. She'd come for reassurance, hadn't she?

"That's not all," she said. "I see shapes sometimes, around people's bodies.

Vague shapes . . . like a kind of light."

Marty thought of the man at the fence; of how he'd bled light, or seemed to.

He didn't interrupt her, however.

"The point is, I feel things other people don't. I don't think it's

particularly clever of me, or anything like that. I just do it. And the last few

weeks I've felt something in the house. I get odd thoughts in my head, out of

nowhere; I dream . . . horrible things." She halted, aware that her description was

getting vaguer, and she risked what little credibility this monologue had if she

went on.

"The lights you see?" Marty said, backtracking.

"Yes."

"I saw something like them."

She leaned forward.

"When?"

"The man who broke in. I thought I saw light coming from him. From his

wounds, I suppose, and his eyes and his mouth." Even as he finished the sentence he

was shrugging it off as if fearful of contagion. "I don't know," he said. "I was

drunk."

"But you saw something."

"-Yes," he conceded, without pleasure.

She got up and crossed to the window. Like father like daughter, he thought:

window freaks, both of them. As she stared out across the lawn-Marty never drew the

curtains-he had ample opportunity to look at her.

"Something . . ." she said, ". . . something."

The grace of her crooked leg, the displaced weight of her buttocks; her face, reflected in the cold glass, so intent on this mystery: all enthralled him.

"That's why he doesn't talk to me any longer," she said.

"Papa?"

"He knows I can feel what he's thinking: and he's frightened."

The observation was a cul-de-sac: she started tapping her foot with irritation, her breath ghosting the window intermittently. Then, out of the blue,

she said:

"Did you know you had a breast fixation?"

"What?"

"You look at them all the time."

"Do I Hell!"

"And you're a liar."

He stood up, not knowing what he intended to do or say until the words were

out. At last, smothered in confusion, only the truth seemed appropriate.

"I like looking at you."

He touched her shoulder. At this point, if they chose, the game could stop;

tenderness was a breath away. They could take the opportunity or let it be: resume

the repartee, or discard it. The moment lay between them, awaiting instructions.

"Babe," she said. "Don't shake."

He moved a half-step closer and kissed the back of her neck. She turned and

returned the kiss, her hand moving up his spine to cup the back of his head, as if

to sense the weight of his skull.

"At last," she said, when they broke. "I was beginning to think you were too

Page 292

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

much of a gentleman." They tumbled onto the bed, and she rolled over to straddle his

hips. Without hesitation she reached to fumble with the belt of his bathrobe. He was

half-hard beneath her, and uncomfortably trapped. Self-conscious, too. She pulled

the bathrobe open, and ran her palms across his chest. His body was solid without

being heavy; silk hair spread out from his sternum and down the central groove of

his abdomen, coarsening as it descended. She sat up a little to release the robe

from his groin. His cock, freed, flipped from four to noon. She stroked its

underside: it responded in gulps.

"Pretty," she said.

He was getting used to her approbation now. Her calm was infectious. He

half-sat up, perching on his elbows to get a better look at her poised above him.

She was intent on his erection, putting her index finger into her mouth and

transferring a film of saliva to his cock, running fingertips up and down in fluid,

lazy motions. He squirmed with pleasure. A rash of heat had appeared on his chest,

further signal,, if any were needed, of his arousal. His cheeks burned too.

"Kiss me," he asked.

She leaned forward and met his mouth. They collapsed back onto the bed. His

hands felt for the bottom of her sweater, and started to ease it up, but she stopped

him.

"No," she murmured into his mouth.

". . . want to see you . . ." he said.

She sat back up. He was looking up at her, perplexed.

"Not so fast," she said, and raised the sweater far enough to expose her belly and breasts to him, without taking the garment off. Marty took in her body

like a blind man granted sight: the dusting of gooseflesh, the unexpected fullness

of her. His hands toured where his eyes went, pressing her bright skin, describing

spirals on her nipples, watching the weight of her breasts ride on her rib cage..

Mouth now followed eye and hand: he wanted to bathe her with his tongue. She pulled

his head against her. Through the mesh of his hair his scalp gleamed a

baby pink.

She craned to kiss it but couldn't reach, and slid her hand down instead to take

hold of his cock. "Be careful," he murmured as she stroked. There was wetness in her

palm; she relinquished her hold.

Gently, he coaxed her over and they fell side by side across the bed. She

pushed the robe off his neck, while his fingers worked at the button at the top of

her jeans. She made no attempt to assist, liking the look of concentration he wore.

It would be so good to be completely naked with him: skin to skin. But this wasn't

the time to risk that. Suppose he saw the bruises and the needle marks, and rejected

her. It would be unbearable.

He had successfully undone the button and unzipped the fly, and now his

hands were in her jeans, sliding under the top of her panties. There was urgency in

him, and much as she loved to watch his intent, she aided the undressing now,

raising her hips from the bed and sliding the jeans and panties down, exposing her

body from nipples to knee. He moved over her, leaving a trail of saliva to mark his

way, licking at her navel, and lower now, face flushed, his tongue in

her, not

expert exactly, but eager to learn, nuzzling out the places that pleased her by the

sound of her sighs.

He slid the jeans lower, and when she didn't resist, all the way off. Her panties followed, and she closed her eyes, blotting out everything but his

exploration. In his eagerness he displayed the instincts of a cannibal; nothing her

body fed him would be rejected; he pressed as deep as anatomy allowed.

Something itched at the back of her neck, but she ignored it, too concerned

with this other sport. He looked up from her groin, with doubt on his face.

"Go on," she said.

She wriggled up the bed, inviting him into her. The doubt on his face persisted.

"What's wrong?"

"No protection," he said.

"Forget it."

He needed no second invitation. Her position, not lying beneath him but

half-sitting, allowed her to watch his sweet display, pressing the root of his cock

until the head darkened and glossed, before entering her slowly,

almost

reverentially. Now he relinquished hold of himself, and put his hands on the bed to

either side of her, his back arched, a crescent within a crescent, as his body

weight carried him in. His lips parted, and his tongue emerged to lap at her eyes.

Page 293

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

She moved to meet him, pressing her hips up to his. He sighed: frowned.

Oh, Jesus, she thought, he's come. But his eyes opened again still raging,

and his strokes, after the initial threat of mistiming, were even and slow.

Again, her neck irritated her; it felt more than an itch. It was a bite, a drill hole. She tried to ignore it, but the sensation only intensified as her body

gave way to the moment. Marty was too intent on their locked anatomies to register

her discomfort. His breath was jagged, hot on her face. She tried to move, hoping

the ache was just the tension of this position.

"Marty . . ." she breathed, "roll over."

He wasn't sure of this maneuver at first, but once he was on his back, and

she sitting on him, he caught her rhythm easily. He began to climb

again: dizzy with

the height.

The pain at her neck persisted, but she thrust it out of focus. She bent forward, her face six inches above Marty's, and let saliva fall from her mouth into

his, a thread of bubbles that -he received with an open grin, pushing up into her as

deep as he could go and holding himself there.

Suddenly, something moved in her. Not Marty. Something or somebody else,

fluttering in her system. Her concentration faltered; her heart too. She lost focus

on where she was and what she was. Another set of eyes seemed to look through hers:

momentarily she shared their owner's vision. She saw sex as depravity, a raw and

bestial exchange.

"No," she said, trying to cancel the nausea that had suddenly risen in her.

Marty opened his eyes to slits, taking her "no" as a command to postpone the

finish.

"I'm trying, babe . . ." he said, grinning. "Just don't move."

She couldn't grasp what he meant at first: he was a thousand miles from her,

lying below in a foul sweat, wounding her against her wishes. "OK?" he breathed,

holding on until it almost hurt. He seemed to swell in her. The sensation drove the

double vision out of her head. The other viewer shrank away behind her eyes,

revolted by the fullness and the fleshiness of this act; by its reality. Did the

intruding mind feel Marty too, she half-thought, its cortex plumbed by a cock-head

that was swelling to cream even now?

"God . . ." she said.

With the other eyes in retreat, the joy came back.

"Can't stop, babe," Marty said.

"Go on," she said. "It's all right. It's all right."

Flecks of her sweat hit him as she moved on top of him.

"Go on. Yes!" she said again. It was an exclamation of pure delight, and it

took him past the point of return. He tried to stave off eruption for a few more

trembling seconds. The weight of her hips on him, the heat of her channel, the

brightness of her breasts, filled his head.

And then somebody spoke; a low, guttural voice.

"Stop it."

Marty's eyes fluttered open, glancing to left and right. There was nobody

else in the room. His head had invented the sound. He canceled the

illusion and

looked back at Carys.

"Go on," she said. "Please go on." She was dancing on him. The bones of her

hips caught the light; the sweat on them ran and ran, glowing.

"Yes . . . Yes . . ." he answered, the voice forgotten.

She looked down at him as imminence infested his face, and through the

intricacies of her own flaring sensations she felt the second mind again. It was a

worm in her budding head, pushing forward, its sickness ready to stain her vision.

She fought it.

"Go away," she told it, under her breath, "go away."

But it wanted to defeat her; to defeat them both. What had seemed like

curiosity before was malice now. It wanted to spoil everything.

"I love you," she told Marty, defying the presence in her. "I love you, I love you-"

The invader spasmed, furious with her, and more furious still that she didn't concede to its spoiling. Marty was rigid, on the threshold; blind and deaf to

anything but pleasure. Then, with a groan, he began to spurt in her, and she was

there too. Her sensations drove all thoughts of resistance out of her head.

Somewhere far off she could hear Marty gasping

"Oh, Jesus," he was saying, "babe . . . babe."

Page 294

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

-but he was in another world. They weren't together, even at this moment.

She in her ecstasy, he in his; each running a private race to completion.

A wayward spasm made Marty convulse. He opened his eyes. Carys had her hands

glued over her face, fingers spread.

"You all right, babe?" he said.

When her eyes opened, he had to bite back a shout. It was, for a moment, not

her who stared out between the bars. It was something dredged up from the bottom of

the sea. Black eyes swiveling in a gray head. Some primeval genus that viewed him-he

knew this to his marrow-with hatred in its bowels.

The hallucination lasted two heartbeats only, but long enough for him to

glance down her body and up again to meet the same vile gaze.

"Carys?"

Then her eyelids fluttered, and the fan of her fingers closed across her

face. For a lunatic instant he flinched, awaiting the revelation. Her hands dropping

from her head; the face transformed: a fish's head. But of course it was her: only

her. Here she was now, smiling at him.

"Are you all right?" he ventured.

"What do you think?"

"I love you, babe."

She murmured something as she slumped on him. They lay there for several

minutes, his cock diminishing in a cooling bath of mingled fluids.

"Aren't you getting a cramp?" he asked her after a while, but she didn't reply. She was asleep.

Gently, he slid her sideways, slipping out of her with a wet sound. She lay

on the bed beside him, her face impassive. He kissed her breasts, licked her

fingers, and fell asleep beside her.

32

Mamouliau felt sick.

She wasn't easy prey, this woman, despite his sentimental claim upon her

psyche. But then her strength was to be expected. She was Whitehead's stock: peasant

breed, thief breed. Cunning and dirty. Though she couldn't know precisely what she

was doing, she'd fought him with the very sensuality he most despised.

But her weaknesses-and she had many-were exploitable. He'd used the heroin

fugues at first, gaining access to her when she was pacified to the point of

indifference. They warped her perception, which had made his invasion less

noticeable, and through her eyes he'd seen the house, listened with her ears to the

witless conversation of its occupants, shared with her, though it revolted him, the

smell of their cologne and their flatulence. She was the perfect spy, living in the

heart of the enemy's camp. And as the weeks had gone by he'd found it easier to slip

in and out of her unnoticed. That had made him careless.

It was carelessness not to have looked before he leaped; to commit himself

to her head without first checking what she was doing. He hadn't even thought she

might be with the bodyguard; and by the time he'd realized his error he was sharing

her sensations-her ridiculous rapture-and it had left him trembling. He would not

make such a mistake again.

He sat in the bare room in the bare house he had bought for himself and

Breer, and tried to forget the turbulence he'd experienced, the look in Strauss'

eyes as he stared up at the girl. Had the thug glimpsed, perhaps, the face behind

her face? The European guessed so.

No matter; none of them would survive. It wouldn't just be the old man, the

way he'd planned at first. All of them-his acolytes, his serfs, all-would go to the

wall with their master.

The memories of Strauss' assaults lingered in the European's entrails; he

longed to evacuate diem. The sensation shamed and disgusted him.

Downstairs, he heard Breer come in or go out; on his way to some atrocity or

home from one. Mamoulian concentrated on the blank wall opposite him, but try as he

might to exile the trauma, he still felt the intrusion: the spurting head, the heat

of the act.

Forget, he said aloud. Forget the brown fire off them. It's no risk to you.

See only the emptiness: the promise of the void.

His innards shook. Beneath his gaze, the paint on the wall seemed to

blister. Venereal eruptions disfigured its emptiness. Illusions; but horribly real

to him nevertheless. Very well: if he couldn't dislodge the obscenities, he would

transform them. It wasn't difficult to smudge sexuality into violence,
turn sighs

into screams, thrusts into convulsions. The grammar was the same;
only the

punctuation differed. Picturing the lovers in death together, the
nausea he'd felt

receded.

In the face of that void what was their substance? Transitory. Their
promises? Pretension.

He began to calm. The sores on the wall had started to heal, and he
was

left, after a few minutes, with an echo of the nothingness he had come
to need so

much. Life came and went. But absence, he knew, went on forever.

33

"Oh, by the way, there was a telephone call for you. From Bill Toy.
Day before

yesterday."

Marty looked up at Pearl from his plate of steak, and pulled a face.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

She looked contrite.

"It was the day I lost my wick with those damn people. I left a
message for

you-

"I didn't get it."

"-on the pad beside the telephone."

It was still there: "Call Toy," and a number. He dialed, and waited a full

minute before the phone was picked up at the other end. It wasn't Toy. The woman who

repeated the number had a soft, lost voice, slurred as if by too much drink.

"Can I speak to William Toy, please?" he asked.

"He's gone," the woman replied.

"Oh. I see."

"He won't be coming back. Not ever."

The quality of the voice was eerie. "Who is this?" it asked of him.

"It doesn't matter," Marty replied. His instinct rebelled against giving his

name.

"Who is this?" she asked again.

"I'm sorry to have bothered you."

"Who is this?"

He put the receiver down on the slushing insistence at the other end. Only

when he had did he realize that his shirt was clinging to a cold sweat that had

suddenly sprung from his chest and spine.

In the love nest in Pimlico, Yvonne asked the vacated line "Who is

this?"

for half an hour or more before letting the telephone drop. Then she went to sit

down. The couch was damp: large, sticky stains were spreading on it from the place

where she always sat. She assumed it was something to do with her, but she couldn't

work out how or why. Nor could she explain the flies that congregated all over her,

in her hair, in her clothes, whining away.

"Who is this?" she asked again. The question remained perfectly pertinent,

though she was no longer speaking to the stranger on the phone. The rotting skin of

her hands, the blood she left in the tub after bathing, the horrid look the mirror

gave her-all inspired the same hypnotic inquiry: "Who is this?"

"Who is this? Who is this? Who is this?"

VI

The Tree

34

Breer hated the house. It was cold, and the natives in this part of the city were

inhospitable. He was regarded with suspicion as soon as he stepped out of the front

door. There were, he had to concede, reasons for this. In recent weeks a smell had

begun to linger around him; a sickly, syrupy smell that made him almost ashamed to

get too close to the pretty ones along the schoolyard railing, for fear they would

put their fingers to their noses, making a "poo-poo" sound, and run off calling him

names. When they did that, it made him want to die.

Though there was no heating in the house, and he had to bathe in cold water,

he nevertheless washed from head to foot three or four times a day, hoping to

dislodge the smell. When that didn't work he bought perfume-sandalwood in

particular-and doused his body with it after each ablution. Now the comments they

Page 296

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

called after him weren't about excreta but about his sex life. He took the brunt of

their remarks with equanimity.

Nevertheless, dull resentments festered in him. Not just about the way he

was treated in the district. The European, after a courtship that had been polite,

was more and more treating him with contempt: as a lackey rather than an ally. It

irritated him, the way he was sent to this haunt or that looking for Toy-asked to

comb a city of millions in search of a shriveled old man whom Breer had last seen

scrambling over a wall stark naked, his scrawny buttocks white in the moonlight. The

European was losing his sense of proportion. Whatever crimes this Toy had committed

against Mamoulia they could scarcely be profound, and it made Breer weak with

tiredness to contemplate another day wandering the streets.

Despite his weariness, the capacity for sleep seemed to have deserted him

almost entirely. Nothing, not even the fatigue that killed his nerves, could

persuade his body to close down for more than a few eye-fluttering minutes, and even

then his mind dreamed such things, such dreadful things, it was scarcely possible to

call the slumber blissful. The only comfort remaining to him was his pretties.

That was one of the few advantages in this house: it had a cellar. Just a

dry, cool space, which he was systematically clearing of the rubbish left by the

previous owners. It was a long job, but he was gradually getting the place the way

he wanted it, and though he had never much liked enclosed spaces there was something

about the darkness, and the sense of being underground, that answered an

unarticulated need in him. Soon he would have it all scrubbed. He would put colored

paper chains around the walls, and flowers in vases on the floor. A table maybe,

with a cloth on it, smelling of violets; comfortable chairs for his guests. Then he

could begin to entertain friends in the manner to which he hoped they would become

accustomed.

All his arrangements could be effected much more quickly if he weren't

forever interrupted by the damn-fool errands the European sent him on. But the time

for such servitude, he'd decided, had come to an end. Today, he would tell Mamouljian

that he wouldn't be blackmailed or bullied into playing this game. He'd threaten to

leave if it came to the worst. He'd go north. There were places north where the sun

didn't come up for five months of the year-he'd read about such places-and that

seemed fine to him. No sun; and deep caves to live in, holes where not even

moonlight could stray. The time had come to lay his cards on the table.

If the air in the house was cold, it was even colder in Mamouljian's room. The

European seemed to exhale a breath that was mortuary-chilled.

Breer stood in the doorway. He'd only been in this room once before, and he

had a niggling fear of it. It was too plain. The European had asked Breer to nail

boards across the window: this he had done. Now, by the light of a single wick,

burning in a dish of oil on the floor, the room looked bleak and gray; everything in

it seemed insubstantial, even the European. He sat in the dark wood chair that was

the only furnishing-and looked at Breer with eyes so glazed he could have been

blind.

"I didn't call you up here," Mamouljian said.

"I wanted . . . to talk to you."

"Close the door, then."

Though this was against his better judgment, Breer obeyed. The lock clicked

at his back; the room was now centered on that single flame and the fitful

luminosity it offered. Sluggishly Breer looked around the room for someplace to sit,

or at least lean. But there was no comfort here: its austerity would have shamed an

ascetic. Just a few blankets on the bare boards in the corner, where the great man

slept; some books stacked against the wall; a pack of cards; a jug of water and a

cup; little else., The walls, except for the rosary that hung from a hook, were

naked.

"What do you want, Anthony?"

All Breer could think was: I hate this room.

"Say what you have to say."

"I want to go . . ."

"Go?"

"Away. The flies bother me. There are so many flies."

"No more than there are in any other May. It is perhaps a little warmer than

usual. All the signs are that the summer will be blistering."

The thought of heat and light made Breer sick. And that was another thing:

Page 297

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

the way his belly revolted if he put food into it. The European had promised him a

new world-health, wealth and happiness-but he was suffering the torments of the

damned. It was a cheat: all a cheat.

"Why didn't you let me die?" he said, without thinking what he was saying.

"I need you."

"But I feel ill."

"The work will soon be over."

Breer looked straight at Mamouljian, something he very rarely mustered the

courage to do. But desperation was a rod at his back.

"You mean finding Toy?" he said. "We won't find him. It's impossible."

"Oh, but we will, Anthony. That I insist upon."

Breer sighed. "I wish I was dead," he said.

"Don't say that. You've got all the freedom you want, haven't you? You feel

no guilt now, do you?"

"Most people would happily suffer your minor discomforts to be guiltless,

Anthony: to commit their heart's desire to flesh and never be called to regret it.

Rest today. Tomorrow we're going to be busy, you and I."

"Why?"

"We're going to visit Mr. Whitehead."

Mamouljian had told him about Whitehead and the house and the dogs. The

damage they'd done to the European was conspicuous. Though his torn hand had healed

quickly, the tissue damage was irreparable. A finger and a half missing, ugly scars

raking palm and face, a thumb that would no longer move properly: his facility with

the cards was permanently spoiled. It was a long and sorry tale he'd

told Breer the

day he'd returned, bloodied, from his encounter with the dogs. A history of promises

broken and trust despised; of atrocities committed against friendship. The European

had wept freely in the telling of it, and Breer had glimpsed the profundity of pain

in him. They were both despised men, conspired against and spat upon. Remembering

the European's confessional, the sense of injustice Breer had felt at the time was

reawoken. And here was he, who owed the European so much-his life, his

sanity-planning to turn his back on his Savior. The Razor-Eater felt ashamed.

"Please," he said, eager to make amends for his petty complaints, "let me go

and kill this man for you."

"No, Anthony."

"I can," Breer insisted. "I'm not afraid of dogs. I feel no pain; not now, not since you came back. I can kill him in his bed."

"I'm sure you could. And I will certainly need you, to keep the dogs off me."

"I'll tear them apart."

Mamouljian looked deeply pleased.

"You do that, Anthony. I loathe the species. Always have. You deal

with them

while I have words with Joseph."

"Why bother with him? He's so old."

"So am I," Mamouliau replied. "Older than I look, believe me. But a bargain

is a bargain."

"It's difficult," said Breer, his eyes wet with phlegmy tears.

"What is?"

"Being the Last."

"Oh, yes."

"Needing to do everything properly; so that the tribe's remembered . . ."

Breer's voice broke. All the glories he'd missed, not being born into a Great Age.

What must that dream time have been like, when the Razor-Eaters and the Europeans,

and all the other tribes, held the world in their hands? There would never come such

an Age again; Mamouliau had said so.

"You won't be forgotten," the European promised.

"I think I will."

The European stood up. He seemed bigger than Breer remembered him; and

darker.

"Have a little faith, Anthony. There is so much to look forward to."

Breer felt a touch at the back of his neck. It seemed a moth had alighted

there and was stroking his nape with its furred antennae. His head had begun to

buzz, as though the flies that beset him had laid eggs in his ears, and they were

suddenly hatching. He shook his head to try to dislocate the sensation.

"It's all right," he heard the European say through the whirring of their

Page 298

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

wings. "Be calm."

"I don't feel well," Breer protested meekly, hoping his weakness would make

Mamouliau merciful. The room was fragmenting around him, the walls separating from

the floor and ceiling, the six sides of this gray box coming apart at the seams and

letting all kinds of nothingness in. Everything had disappeared into a fog:

furniture, blankets, even Mamouliau.

"There's so much to look forward to," he heard the European repeat, or was

it an echo, coming back to him from some far-off cliff face? Breer was terrified.

Though he could no longer even see his outstretched arm, he knew that this place

went on forever and he was lost in it. The tears came thicker. His nose

ran, his

guts knotted.

Just as he thought he must scream or lose his mind, the European
appeared

out of the nothingness in front of him, and by the lightning flash of his
eclipsed

consciousness Breer saw the man transformed. Here was the source of
all flies, all

blistering summers and killing winters, all loss, all fear, floating before
him more

naked than any man had right to be, naked to the point of not-being.
Now he spread

his good hand toward Breer. In it were bone dice, carved with faces
Breer almost

recognized, and the Last European was crouching, and was tossing the
dice, faces and

all, into the void, while somewhere close by a thing with fire for a
head wept and

wept until it seemed they would all drown in tears.

35

Whitehead took the vodka glass, and the bottle, and went down to the
sauna. It had

become a favorite retreat of his during the weeks of Crisis. Now,
though the danger

was far from over, he had lost focus on the state of the Empire. Large
sectors of

the corporation's European and Far Eastern operations had already
been sold off to

cut their losses; receivers had been called in to a couple of smaller firms; there

were mass redundancies planned for some of the chemical plants in Germany and

Scandinavia: last-ditch attempts to stave off closure or sale. Joe had other

problems on his mind, however. Empires could be regained, life and sanity could not.

He'd sent the financiers away, and the government think-tank men: sent them back to

their banks and their report-lined offices in Whitehall. There was nothing they

could tell him that he wanted to hear. No graphs, no computer displays, no

predictions interested him. In the five weeks since the beginning of the Crisis he

remembered with interest only one conversation: the debate he'd had with Strauss.

He liked Strauss. More to the point, he trusted Strauss, and that was a

commodity rarer than uranium in the bazaar Joe bartered in. Toy's instinct about

Strauss had been correct; Bill had been a man with a nose for integrity in others.

Sometimes, particularly when the vodka filled him with sentiment and remorse, he

missed Toy badly. But he was damned if he'd mourn: that had never been his style,

and he wasn't about to start now. He poured himself another glass of vodka and

raised it.

"To the Fall," he said, and drank.

He'd worked up a good head of steam in the white-tiled room, and sitting on

the bench in the half-light, blotched and florid, he felt like some fleshy plant. He

enjoyed the sensation of sweat in the folds of his belly, at his armpits and groin;

simple physical stimuli that distracted him from bad thoughts.

Maybe the European wouldn't come after all, he thought. Pray God.

Somewhere in the benighted house a door opened and closed, but the drink and

the steam made him feel quite aloof from events elsewhere. The sauna was another

planet; his, and his alone. He put the drained glass down on the tiles and closed

his eyes, hoping to drowse.

Breer went to the gate. There was a hum of electricity off it, and the sour smell of

power in the air.

"You're strong," the European said. "You told me so. Open the gate."

Breer put his hand on the wire. The boasts were true: he felt only the

slightest tremor. There was just a cooking smell and the sound of his teeth

chattering as he started to tear the gate apart. He was stronger than he'd imagined.

There was no fear in him, and its absence made him Herculean. Now the dogs had

started to bark along the fence, but he just thought: let them come. He wasn't going

to die. Perhaps he would never die.

Laughing like a loon, he ripped the gate open; the hum stopped as the circuit was broken. The air was tinged with blue smoke.

Page 299

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"That's good," said the European.

Breer tried to drop the section of wire he was holding, but some of it had

welded itself into his palm. He had to tear it out with his other hand. He looked

down incredulously at his seared flesh. It was blackened, and smelled appetizing.

Soon, surely, it must begin to hurt a little. No man-not even a man like him,

guiltless and sublimely strong-could receive a wound like this and not suffer. But

there was no sensation.

Suddenly-out of the dark-a dog.

Mamouljian backed off, fear convulsing him, but Breer was its intended

victim. A few paces from its target the dog leaped, and its bulk struck Breer center

chest. The impact toppled him over onto his back, and the dog was swiftly on top of

him, jaws snapping at his throat. Breer was armed with a long-bladed kitchen knife,

but he seemed uninterested in the weapon, though it was within easy reach. His fat

face broke into a laugh as the dog scrabbled to get access to the man's neck. Breer

simply took hold of the dog's lower jaw. The animal snapped down, clamping Breer's

hand in its mouth. Almost immediately it realized its error. Breer reached around

the back of the dog's head with his free hand, grabbed a fistful of fur and muscle,

and jerked neck and head in opposite directions. There was a grinding sound. The dog

roared in its throat, still unwilling to let go of its executioner's hand, even as

blood sprang from between its clenched teeth. Breer gave the dog another lethal

wrench. Its eyes showed white and its limbs stiffened. It slumped down onto Breer's

chest, dead.

Other dogs barked in the distance, responding to the death-yelp they'd

heard. The European looked nervously to right and left along the fence.

"Get up! Quickly!"

Breer loosed his hand from the dog's maw and shrugged the corpse

off. He was

still laughing.

"Easy," he said.

"There's more."

"Take me to them."

"Maybe too many for you to take on all at once."

"Was this the one?" Breer asked, kicking the dead dog over so that the European could see it better.

"The one?"

"That took off your fingers?"

"I don't know," the European replied, avoiding Breer's blood-spattered face

as it grinned at him, eyes sparkling like an adolescent's in love.

"The kennels?" he suggested. "Finish them off there."

"Why not?"

The European led off from the fence in the direction of the kennels.
Thanks

to Carys, the layout of the Sanctuary was as familiar to him as the palm of his own

hand. Breer kept pace with him, stinking of blood already, a spring in his heavy

step. He had seldom felt so alive.

Life was so good, wasn't it? So very good.

The dogs barked.

In her room Carys pulled the pillow over her head to shut out the din.

Tomorrow she'd pluck up her courage and tell Lillian that she resented being kept

awake half the night by hysterical hounds. If she was ever going to be healthy she'd

have to start learning the rhythms of a normal life. That meant going about her

business while the sun shone, and sleeping at night.

As she turned over to find a portion of the bed that was still cool an image

flashed into her head. It was gone again before she could entirely grasp it but she

caught enough to wake her with a start. She saw a man-faceless, but

familiar-crossing a tract of grass. At his heels, a tide of filth. It crept close

behind him, in blind adoration, its waves sibilant as snakes. She didn't have time

to see what the waves contained, and perhaps that was a good thing.

She turned over a third time, and ordered herself to forget these nonsenses.

Curiously, the dogs had stopped barking.

And what, after all, was the worst he could do, what was the very worst? Whitehead

had tried on this particular question so often it felt like a familiar coat. The

possible physical torments were endless, of course. Sometimes, in the clammy hug of

a three-A.M. sweat, he would deem himself worthy of them all-if a man could die a

Page 300

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

dozen, two dozen times-because the crimes of power he had committed were not easily

paid for. The things, oh, Jesus in Heaven, the things he had done.

But then, damn it, who would not have crimes to confess, when the time came?

Who would not have acted out of greed, and envy; or grappled for station, and having

gained it, been absolute in authority rather than relinquish it? He couldn't be held

responsible for everything the corporation had done. If, once in a decade, a medical

preparation that deformed fetuses had slipped onto the market, was he to blame

because there'd been profit made? That kind of moral accounting was for the writers

of revenge fiction: it didn't belong in the real world, where most crimes went

punished only with wealth and influence; where the worm seldom turned, and when it

did was immediately crushed; where the best a man could hope was that having risen

to his ambition's height by wit, stealth or violence there was some smidgen of

pleasure in the view. That was the real world, and the European was

as familiar with

its ironies as he was. Hadn't Mamouljian shown him so much of it himself? How, in all

conscience, could the European turn around and punish his student for learning his

lessons too well?

I'll probably die in a warm bed, Whitehead thought, with curtains partially

drawn against a yellow spring sky, and surrounded by admirers. "There is nothing to

fear," he said aloud. The steam billowed. The tiles, laid with an obsessive's

precision, sweated with him: but coldly, where he was hot.

Nothing to fear.

36

From the door of the doghouse Mamouljian watched Breer at work. It was an efficient

slaughter this time, not the trial of strength he'd had with the dog at the gate.

The fat man simply opened the cages and then the throats of the dogs one by one,

using his long-bladed knife. Cornered in their cells the dogs were easy prey. All

they could do was turn and turn, snapping uselessly at their assassin, somehow

knowing the battle was lost before it was truly entered. They dropped turds as they

slumped down, slashed necks and flanks spurting, brown eyes turned up to look at

Breer like painted saints. He killed the pups too; tearing them from their mother's

lap and cracking their heads open in his hand. Bella fought back with more vehemence

than the other dogs, determined to inflict as much damage as she could on the killer

before she too was killed. He returned the favor, mutilating her body after he'd

silenced her; wounds in return for the wounds she'd given him. Once the clamor was

over, and the only movement in the cages was the twitch of a leg or the splash of a

bladder giving vent, Breer pronounced himself finished. They went together toward

the house.

There were two more dogs here; the last of them. The Razor-Eater made short

work of them both. By now he looked more like an abattoir worker than a sometime

librarian. The European thanked him. It had been easier than he'd expected.

"I have business inside the house now," he told Breer.

"Do you want me to come?"

"No. But you could open the door for me, if you would."

Breer went to the back door and punched out the glass, then reached through

and unlocked it, letting Mamoulia into the kitchen.

"Thank you. Wait here for me."

The European disappeared into the blue gloom of the interior. Breer watched

him go, and once his master was out of sight, entered the Sanctuary after him, blood

and smiles wreathing his face.

Though the pall of steam muffled the sound, Whitehead had the impression that

somebody was moving around in the house. Strauss, probably: the man had become

restless recently. Whitehead let his eyes drift closed again.

Somewhere close by, he heard a door opening and closing, the door of the

antechamber beyond the steam room. He stood up, and quizzed the gloom.

"Marty?"

There was no answer from Marty or anybody else. The certainty of having

heard a door at all faltered. It wasn't always easy to judge sound here. Nor vision.

The steam had thickened considerably; he could no longer see across to the other

side of the room.

"Is there somebody there?" he asked.

The steam was a dead, gray wall in front of his eyes. He cursed himself for

letting it get so heavy.

Page 301

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"Martin?" he said again. Though there was neither sight nor sound to confirm

his suspicions, he knew he wasn't alone. Somebody was very close, and yet not

answering. When he spoke he reached, inch by tremulous inch, across the tiles to the

towel folded at his side. His fingers investigated the fold while his eyes stayed

fixed on the steam-wall; in the towel was a gun. His grateful fingers located it.

This time more quietly, he addressed the invisible visitor. The gun gave him

confidence.

"I know you're there. Show yourself, you bastard. I won't be terrorized."

Something moved in the steam. Eddies began, and multiplied. Whitehead could

hear the double thump of his heart in his ears. Whoever it was (let it not be him,

oh, Christ, let it not be him) he was ready. And then, without warning, the steam

divided, killed by a sudden cold. The old man raised the gun. If it was Marty out

there, and he was playing some sick joke, he was going to regret it. The hand that

held the gun had begun to tremble.

And now, finally, there was a figure in front of him. It was still

indecipherable in the mist. At least it was until a voice he'd heard a hundred times

in his vodka-sodden dreams said:

"Pilgrim. "

The steam shrank back. The European was there, standing in front of him. His

face had scarcely conceded the seventeen years since last they'd met. The domed

brow, the eyes set so deep in their orbits they glinted like water at the bottom of

a well. He had changed so little, as though time-in awe of him-had passed him by.

"Sit down," he said.

Whitehead didn't move; the gun was still pointed directly at the European.

"Please, Joseph. Sit down."

Might it be better if he sat? Might the death blows be avoided by a feigned

meekness? Or was it melodrama to think that this man would stoop to blows? What kind

of dream have I been living in, Whitehead chided himself, to think he'd come here to

bruise me, to bleed me? Such eyes have more than bruising on their mind.

He sat down. He was aware of his nakedness, but he didn't much care.

Mamouliau wasn't seeing his flesh; he looked deeper than fat and bone.

Whitehead could feel the stare in him now; it stroked his heart. How else

was he to explain the relief he felt, seeing the European at last?

"It's so long . . ." was all he could say: a limping banality. Did he sound like a hopeful lover, longing for a reconciliation? Perhaps that wasn't so far from

the truth. The singularity of their mutual hatred had the purity of love.

The European studied him.

"Pilgrim," he murmured reproachfully, glancing at the gun, "there's no need.

Or use."

Whitehead smiled and laid the gun down on the towel beside him.

"I was afraid of you coming," he said, by way of explanation. "That's why I

bought the dogs. You know how I loathe dogs. But I knew you loathed them more."

Mamouliau put his finger to his lips to hush Whitehead's talk.

"I forgive the dogs," he said. Whom was he forgiving: the animals or the man

who'd used them against him?

"Why did you have to come back?" Whitehead said. "You must have known I

wouldn't welcome you."

"You know why I came."

"No I don't. Really. I don't."

"Joseph," Mamouljian sighed. "Don't treat me like one of your politicians."

I'm not to be paid off in promises, then thrown away when your fortunes change. You

can't treat me like that."

"I didn't."

"No lies, please. Not now. Not with so little time left to us. This time, this last time, let us be honest with each other. Let us spill our hearts. There

won't be any more opportunities."

"Why not? Why can't we start again?"

"We're old. And tired."

"I'm not."

"Why haven't you fought for your Empire, then, if not because of fatigue?"

"That was your doing?" Whitehead asked, already certain of the reply.

Mamouljian nodded. "You're not the only man I've helped to fortune. I've got

friends in the highest circles; all, like you, students of Providence. They could

buy and sell half the world if I asked them to; they owe me that. But none of them

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

were ever quite like you, Joseph. You were the hungriest, and the ablest. Only with

you did I see a chance of-

"Go on," Whitehead prompted. "Chance of what?"

"Salvation," Mamouliau replied, then laughed the thought off. "Of all things," he said quietly.

Whitehead had never imagined it would be like this: a hushed debate in a

white-tiled room, two old men exchanging hurts. Turning the memories over like

stones, and watching the lice scuttle away. It was so much more gentle and so much

more painful. Nothing scourged like loss.

"I made mistakes," he said, "and I'm genuinely sorry for them."

"Tell me the truth," Mamouliau scolded.

"That is the truth, damn it. I'm sorry. What more do you want? Land?

Companies? What do you want?"

"You amaze me, Joseph. Even now, in extremis, you try to make bargains. What

a loss you are. What a terrible loss. I could have made you great."

"I am great."

"You know better than that, Pilgrim," he said gently. "What would you have

been, without me? With your glib tongue and your fancy suits. An

actor? A car

salesman? A thief?"

Whitehead flinched, not just at the taunts. The steam had become uneasy

behind Mamouliau, as if ghosts had begun to move in it.

"You were nothing. At least have the good grace to admit that."

"I took you on," Whitehead pointed out.

"Oh, yes," said Mamouliau. "You had appetite, I grant you. You had that in

abundance."

"You needed me," Whitehead retorted. The European had wounded him; now,

despite his better judgment, he wanted to wound in return. This was his world, after

all. The European was a trespasser here: unarmed, unaided. And he had asked for the

truth to be told. Well, he'd hear it, ghosts or no ghosts.

"Why would I need you?" Mamouliau asked. There was sudden contempt in his

tone. "What are you worth?"

Whitehead held off answering for a moment; and then he was spilling the

words, careless of the consequences.

"To live for you, because you were too bloodless to do it for yourself! That

was why you picked me up. To taste it all through me. The women,

the power: all of

it."

"No..."

"You're looking sick, Mamouliau-"

He called the European by his name. See that? God, the ease of it. He called

the bastard by his name, and he didn't look away when those eyes glinted, because he

was telling the truth here, wasn't he? They both knew it. Mamouliau was pale; almost

insipid. Drained of the will to live. Suddenly, Whitehead began to know he could win

this confrontation, if he was clever.

"Don't try to fight," Mamouliau said. "I will have my due."

"Which is?"

"You. Your death. Your soul, for want of a better word."

"You had all I owed you and more, years ago."

"That wasn't the bargain, Pilgrim."

"We all make deals and then change the rules."

"That's not playing the game."

"There is only one game. You taught me that. As long as I win that one . . .

the rest don't matter."

"I will have what's mine," Mamouliau said with quiet determination.

"It's a

foregone conclusion."

"Why not just have me killed?"

"You know me, Joseph. I want this to finish cleanly. I'm granting you time

to organize your affairs. To close the books, clean the slates, give the land back

to those you stole it from."

"I didn't take you for a Communist."

"I'm not here to debate politics. I came to tell you my terms."

So, Whitehead thought, the execution date is a while away. He quickly put

all thoughts of escape out of his head, for fear the European sniff them out.

Mamouljian had reached into his jacket pocket. The mutilated hand brought out a large

envelope, folded on itself. "You will dispose of your assets in strict accordance

Page 303

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

with these directions."

"All to friends of yours, presumably."

"I have no friends."

"It's fine by me." Whitehead shrugged. "I'm glad to be rid of it."

"Didn't I warn you it would become burdensome?"

"I'll give it all away. Become a saint, if you like. Will you be satisfied

then?"

"As long as you die, Pilgrim," the European said.

"No."

"You and I together."

"I'll die in my time," Whitehead said, "not in yours."

"You won't want to go alone." Behind the European the ghosts were getting

restless. The steam simmered with them.

"I'm not going anywhere," Whitehead said. He thought he glimpsed faces in

the billows. Perhaps defiance wasn't wise, he decided. ". . . Where's the harm?" he

muttered, half-standing to ward off whatever the steam contained. The sauna lights

were dimming. Mamouljian's eyes shone in the deepening murk, and there was

illumination spilling up from his throat too, staining the air. The ghosts were

taking substance from it, growing more palpable by the second.

"Stop," Whitehead begged, but it was a vain hope.

The sauna had vanished. The steam was discharging its passengers. Whitehead

could feel their prickling gaze on him. Only now did he feel naked. He bent for the

towel, and when he stood upright again, Mamouljian had gone. He clutched the towel to

his groin. He could feel how the ghosts in the darkness smirked at his breasts, at

his shrunken pudenda, at the sheer absurdity of his old flesh. They had known him in

rarer times; when the chest had been broad, the pudenda arrogant, the flesh

impressive whether naked or dressed.

"Mamoulia . . ." he murmured, hoping the European might yet undo this

misery before it got out of control. But nobody answered his appeal.

He took a faltering step across the slippery tiles toward the door. If the

European had gone, then he could simply walk out of the place, find Strauss and a

room where he could hide. But the ghosts weren't finished with him yet. The steam,

which had darkened to a bruise, lifted a little, and in its depths something

shimmered. He couldn't make sense of it at first: the uncertain whiteness, the

fluttering, as of snowflakes.

Then, from nowhere, a breeze. It belonged to the past: and smelled of it. Of

ash and brick dust; of the dirt on bodies unwashed for decades; of burning hair, of

anger. But there was another smell that wove between these, and when he breathed it

the significance of that shimmering air came clear, and he forsook the towel and

covered his eyes, tears and pleas coming and coming.

But the ghosts pressed in nevertheless, carrying the scent of petals
with

them.

37

Carys stood on the small landing outside Marty's room, and listened.
From inside,

there came the sound of steady sleep. She hesitated a moment-unsure
of whether or

not to go in-then slipped down the stairs again, leaving him unawoken.
It was too

convenient to slide into bed beside him, to weep into the crook of his
neck where

his pulse ticked, to unburden herself of all her fretting and beg him to
be strong

for her. Convenient and dangerous. It wasn't real safety, there in his
bed. She'd

find that by herself and in herself, nowhere else.

Halfway down the second flight of stairs she stopped. There was a
curious

tingle in the darkened hallway. A chill of night air: and more. She
waited,

shadow-thin, on the stairs, until her eyes accustomed themselves to
the dark.

Perhaps she should just go back upstairs, lock her bedroom door
behind her, and find

a few pills to while away the hours until the sun came up. It would be
so much

easier than living as she was, with every nerve electric. Along the hall toward the

kitchen she caught a movement. A black bulk was framed against the doorway, and then

gone.

It's just the dark, she told herself, playing tricks. She smoothed her hand

over the wall, feeling the design of the wallpaper ripple under her fingertips until

she found the light switch. She flipped it on. The corridor was empty. The stairway

at her back was empty. The landing was empty. She muttered "Stupid" to herself, and

padded down the last three stairs and along the corridor to the kitchen.

Page 304

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

Before she got there, her suspicions about the chill were confirmed. The

back door was in direct line with the kitchen door, and both were open. It was odd,

almost shocking in fact, to see the house, which was usually hermetically sealed,

exposed to the night. The open door was like a wound in its flank.

She stepped through from the carpeted hallway onto the cool linoleum of the

kitchen and was halfway to closing the door when she caught the glass glinting on

the floor. The door had not been left open accidentally; somebody had forced his way

in. A smell-sandalwood-was pricking her nostrils. It was sickly; but what it covered

was sicklier still.

She had to inform Marty; that was the first priority. No need to go back

upstairs. There was a phone on the kitchen wall.

Her mind divided. Part of her coolly assessed the problem and its solutions:

where the phone was, what she must say to Marty when he answered it. Another part,

the part that embraced H, that was always frightened, dissolved in panic. There's

somebody close (sandalwood), it said, somebody lethal in the dark, rotting in the

dark.

The cooler self kept control. She walked-glad now to be barefoot because she

made scarcely a sound-across to the phone. She picked up the receiver and dialed

nineteen, the number of Marty's bedroom. It rang once, then again. She willed him to

wake quickly. Her reserves of control were, she knew, strictly limited.

"Come on, come on . . ." she breathed.

Then there was a sound behind her; heavy feet crunched the glass into smaller pieces. She turned to see who it was, and there was a

nightmare standing in

the doorway with a knife in his hand and a dogskin slung over one shoulder. The

phone slipped from her fingers, and the part of her that had advised panic all along

took the reins.

Told you so, it shouted. Told you so!

A phone rang in Marty's dreams. He dreamed he woke, put it to his ear, and

spoke to death on the other end of the line. But the ringing went on even though

he'd picked the phone up and he surfaced from sleep to find the receiver in his hand

and no one on the line.

He put it back in its cradle. Had it rung at all? He thought not. Still, the

dream wasn't worth going back to: his conversation with death had been gobbledygook.

Swinging his legs out of bed he pulled on his jeans and was at the door,

bleary-eyed, when from downstairs there came the crash of breaking glass.

The butcher had lurched toward her-throwing off the dog's skin to make an

embrace easier. She ducked him once; twice. He was ponderous, but she knew if he

once got his hands on her, that was the end. He was between her and the exit into

the house now; she was obliged to maneuver her way toward the back door.

"I wouldn't go out there-" he advised, his voice, like his smell, mixing sweetness and rot. "It's not safe."

His warning was the best recommendation she'd heard. She slipped around the

kitchen table and out through the open door, trying to skip across the glass shards.

She contrived to pull the door closed behind her-more glass fell and shattered-and

then she was away from the house. Behind her, she heard the door pulled open so

roughly it might have been wrenched off its hinges. Now she heard the dog-killer's

footsteps-thunder in the ground-coming after her.

The brute was slow: she was nimble. He was heavy: she was light to the point

of invisibility. Instead of clinging to the walls of the house, which would only

take her around to the front eventually, where the lawn was illuminated, she struck

out away from the building, and hoped to God the beast couldn't see in the dark.

Marty stumbled down the stairs, still shaking sleep from his head. The cold

in the hall slapped him fully awake. He followed the draft to the kitchen. He only

had a few seconds to take in the glass and the blood on the floor

before Carys

started screaming.

From some unimaginable place, someone cried out. Whitehead heard the voice, a girl's

voice, but lost as he was in a wilderness, he couldn't fix the cry. He had no idea

how long he'd been weeping here, watching the damned come and go: it seemed an age.

His head swam with hyperventilation; his throat was hoarse with sobs.

"Mamouliau . . ." he pleaded again, "don't leave me here."

The European had been right—he didn't want to go alone into this nowhere.

Though he had begged to be saved from it a hundred times without result, now, at

last, the illusion began to relent. The tiles, like shy white crabs, scuttled back

Page 305

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

into place at his feet; the smell of his own stale sweat reassaulted him, more

welcome than any scent he'd ever smelled. And now the European was here in front of

him, as if he had never moved.

"Shall we talk, Pilgrim?" he asked.

Whitehead was shivering, despite the heat. His teeth chattered.

"Yes," he said.

"Quietly? With dignity and politeness?"

Again: "Yes."

"You didn't like what you saw."

Whitehead ran his fingers across his pasty face, his thumb and forefinger

digging into the pits at the bridge of his nose, as if to push the sights out. "No,

damn you," he said. The images would not be dislodged. Not now, not ever.

"Perhaps we could talk somewhere else," the European suggested.

"Don't you

have a room we could retire to?"

"I heard Carys. She screamed."

Mamouliau closed his eyes for a moment, fetching a thought from the girl.

"She's quite all right," he said.

"Don't hurt her. Please. She's all I've got."

"There's no harm done. She simply found a piece of my friend's handiwork."

Breer had not only skinned the dog, he'd disemboweled it. Carys had slipped in the

muck of its innards, and the scream had escaped before she could stop herself. When

its reverberations died she listened for the butcher's footsteps. Somebody was

running in her direction.

"Carys!" It was Marty's voice.

"I'm over here."

He found her staring down at the dog's skinned head.

"Who the fuck did this?" he snapped.

"He's here," she said. "He followed me out."

He touched her face. "Are you all right?"

"It's only a dead dog," she said. "It was just a shock."

As they returned to the house, she remembered the dream she'd woken from.

There'd been a faceless man crossing this very lawn-were they treading in his

footprints now?-with a surf of shit at his heels.

"There's somebody else here," she said, with absolute certainty, "besides

the dog-killer."

"Sure."

She nodded, face stony, then took Marty's arm. "This one's worse, babe."

"I've got a gun. It's in my room."

They'd come to the kitchen door; the dog's skin still lay discarded beside

it.

"Do you know who they are?" he asked her. She shook her head.

"He's fat," was all she could say. "Stupid-looking."

"And the other one. You know him?"

The other? Of course she knew him: he was as familiar as her own face. She

had thought of him a thousand times a day in the last weeks; something told her she

had always known him. He was the Architect who paraded in her sleep, who dabbled his

fingers at her neck, who had come now to unleash the flood of filth that had

followed him across the lawn. Was there ever a time when she hadn't lived in his

shadow?

"What are you thinking?"

He was giving her such a sweet look, trying to put a heroic face on his confusion.

"I'll tell you sometime," she said. "Now we should get that damn gun."

They threaded their way through the house. It was absolutely still. No bloody footsteps, no cries. He fetched the gun from his room.

"Now for Papa," he said. "Check that he's all right."

With the dog-killer still loose the search was stealthy, and therefore slow.

Whitehead wasn't in any of the bedrooms, or his dressing rooms. The bathrooms, the

library, the study and the lounges were similarly deserted. It was Carys who

suggested the sauna.

Marty flung the door of the steam room open. A wall of humid heat met his face, and

steam curled out into the hallway. The place had certainly been used recently. But

Page 306

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

the steam room, the Jacuzzi and solarium were all empty. When he'd made a quick

search of the rooms he came back to find Carys leaning unsteadily on the doorjamb.

". . . I suddenly feel sick," she said. "It just came over me."

Marty supported her as her legs gave.

"Sit down for a minute." He guided her across to a bench. There was a gun on

it, sweating.

"I'm all right," she insisted. "You go and find Papa, I'll stay here."

"You look bloody awful."

"Thank you," she said. "Now will you please go? I'd prefer to throw up with

nobody watching, if you don't mind."

"You sure?"

"Go on, damn you. Leave me be. I'll be fine."

"Lock the door after me," he stressed.

"Yes, sir," she said, throwing him a queasy look. He left her in the steam

room, and waited until he heard the bolt drawn across. It didn't completely reassure

him, but it was better than nothing.

He cautiously made his way back into the vestibule, and decided to take a

quick look around the front of the house. The lawn lights were on, and if the old

man were there he'd soon be picked out. That made Marty an easy target too, of

course, but at least he was armed. He unlocked the front door and stepped out onto

the gravel. The floodlights poured unflinching illumination down. It was whiter than

sunlight, but curiously dead. He scanned the lawn to right and left. There was no

sign of the old man.

Behind him, in the hallway, Breer watched the hero stride out in search of

his master. Only when he was well out of sight did the Razor-Eater slouch out of

hiding and lope, bloody-handed, toward his heart's desire.

38

Having bolted the door Carys returned, groggily, to the bench and concentrated on

controlling her mutinous system. She wasn't certain what had brought the nausea on,

but she was determined to get the better of it. When she had, she'd go after Marty

and help him search for Papa. The old man had been here recently,
that much was

apparent. That he'd left without his gun did not augur well.

An insinuating voice stirred her from her meditation, and she looked
up.

There was a smudge in the steam, in front of her, a paleness projected
onto the air.

She squinted to try to make sense of it. It seemed to have the texture
of white

dots. She stood up, and far from vanishing the illusion strengthened.
Filaments were

spreading to connect one dot to the next, and she almost laughed with
recognition as

all at once the puzzle came clear. It was blossom she was looking at,
brilliant

white heads of it caught in sun or starlight. Twitched by some
sourceless wind, the

branches threw down flurries of petals. They seemed to graze her face,
though when

she put her fingers to the places there was nothing there.

In her years of addiction to H she'd never dreamed an image that was
so

superficially benign and yet so charged with threat. It wasn't hers, this
tree. She

hadn't made it from her own head. It belonged to someone who'd been
here before her:

the Architect, no doubt. He'd shown this spectacle to Papa, and its
echoes lingered.

She tried to look away, around to the door, but her eyes were glued to the

tree. She couldn't seem to unfix them. She had the impression that the blossom was

swelling, as if more buds were coming into bloom. The blankness of the tree-its

horrid purity-was filling her eyes, the whiteness congealing and fattening.

And then, somewhere beneath these swaying, laden branches, a figure moved. A

woman with burning eyes lifted her broken head in Carys' direction. Her presence

brought the nausea back. Carys felt faint. This wasn't the time to lose

consciousness. Not with the blossom still bursting and the woman beneath the tree

moving out of hiding toward her. She had been beautiful, this one: and used to

admiration. But chance had intervened. The body had been cruelly maimed, the beauty

spoiled. When, finally, she emerged from hiding, Carys knew her as her own.

"Mama."

Evangeline Whitehead opened her arms, and offered her daughter an embrace

she had never offered while alive. In death, had she discovered the capacity to love

as well as be loved? No. Never. The open arms were a trap, Carys knew it. If she

fell into them the tree, and its Maker, would have her, forever.

Her head thundering, she forced herself to look away. Her limbs were like

jelly; she wondered if she had the strength to move. Unsteadily, she craned her head

Page 307

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

toward the door. To her shock she saw that it was wide open. The bolt had been

wrenched off as the door was beaten open.

"Marty?" she said.

"No."

She turned again, this time to her left, and the dog-killer was standing no

more than two yards from her. He had washed his hands and face of bloodstains, and

he smelled strongly of perfume.

"You're safe with me," he said.

She glanced back at the tree. It was dissolving, its illusory life dispersed

by the brute's interruption. Carys' mother, arms still outstretched, was growing

thin and wretched. At the last instant before she disappeared she opened her mouth

and vomited a stream of black blood toward her daughter. Then the tree and its

horrors were gone. There was only the steam, and the tiles, and a man with dog's

blood under his fingernails standing beside her. She'd heard nothing of his forced

entry: the reverie at the tree had muted the outside world.

"You shouted," he explained. "I heard you shout."

She didn't remember doing so. "I want Marty," she told him.

"No," he replied politely.

"Where is he?" she demanded, and made a move, albeit weakly, toward the open

door.

"I said no!" He stepped in her path. He didn't need to touch her. His very

proximity was sufficient to halt her. She contemplated trying to slip by him, and

out into the hallway, but how far could she get before he caught her? There were two

basic rules when dealing with mad dogs and psychotics. The first: don't run. The

second: show no fear. When he reached out toward her she tried not to recoil.

"I won't let anybody hurt you," he said. He ran the ball of his thumb across

the back of her hand, finding a speck of sweat there, and brushing it away. His

stroke was feather-light; and ice-cold.

"Will you let me look after you, pretty?" he asked.

She said nothing; his touch appalled her. Not for the first time tonight she

wished she weren't a sensitive: she'd never felt such distress at another human's

touch.

"I would like to make you comfortable," he was saying. "Share . . ." He stopped, as though the words escaped him. ". . . your secrets."

She looked up into his face. The muscles of his jaw fluttered as he made his

proposals, nervous as an adolescent.

"And in return," he proposed, "I'll show you my secrets. You want to see?"

He didn't wait for an answer. His hand had plunged into the pocket of his

stained jacket and was taking out a clutch of razors. Their edges glinted. It was

too absurd: like a fairground sideshow, but played without the razzmatazz. This

clown, smelling of sandalwood, was about to eat razors to win her love. He put out

his dry tongue and laid the first blade on it. She didn't like this one bit; razors

made her nervous, and always had.

"Don't," she said.

"It's all right," he told her, swallowing hard. "I'm the last of the tribe.

See?" He opened his mouth and put out his tongue. "All gone."

"Extraordinary," she said. It was. Revolting, but extraordinary.

"That's not all," he said, pleased by her response.

It was best to let him go on with this bizarre display, she reasoned.
The

longer he took showing her these perversities, the more chance there
was of Marty

coming back.

"What else can you do?" she asked.

He let go of her hand and started to unbuckle his belt.

"I'll show you," he replied, unbuttoning.

Oh, Christ, she thought, stupid, stupid, stupid. His arousal at this
exhibition was absolutely plain even before he had his trousers down.

"I'm past pain now," he explained courteously. "No pain, whatever I do
to

myself. The Razor-Eater feels nothing."

He was naked beneath his trousers. "See?" he said, proudly.

She saw. His groin was completely shaved, and the region sported an
array-of

self-inflicted adornments. Hooks and rings transfixing the fat of his
lower belly

and his genitals. His testicles bristled with needles.

"Touch me," he invited.

"No . . . thank you," she said.

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

He frowned; his upper lip curled to expose teeth that in his pale flesh looked bright yellow.

"I want you to touch me," he said, and reached for her.

"Breer. "

The Razor-Eater stood absolutely still. Only his eyes flickered.

"Let her alone."

She knew the voice; too well. It was the Architect, of course; her dreamguide.

"I didn't hurt her," Breer mumbled. "Did I? Tell him I didn't hurt you."

"Cover yourself up," the European said.

Breer hoisted up his trousers like a boy caught masturbating, and moved away

from Carys, throwing her a conspiratorial glance. Only now did the speaker come into

the steam room. He was taller than she'd dreamed he'd be, and more doleful.

"I'm sorry," he said. His tone was that of the perfect maitre d', apologizing for a gauche waiter.

"She was sick," Breer said. "That's why I broke in."

"Sick?"

"Talking to the wall," he blustered. "Calling after her mother."

The Architect understood the observation immediately. He looked at Carys

keenly.

"So you saw?" he said.

"What was it?"

"Nothing you need ever suffer again," he replied.

"My mother was there. Evangeline."

"Forget it all," he said. "That horror's for others, not for you." Listening

to his calm voice was mesmeric. She found it difficult to recall her nightmares of

nullity; his presence canceled memory.

"I think perhaps you should come with me," he said.

"Why?"

"Your father's going to die, Carys."

"Oh?" she said.

She felt utterly removed from herself. Fears were a thing of the past in his

courteous presence.

"If you stay here, you'll only suffer with him, and there's no need for that."

It was a seductive offer; never to live under the old man's thumb again,

never to endure his kisses, that tasted so old. Carys glanced at Breer.

"Don't be afraid of him," the Architect reassured her, laying a hand on the

back of her neck. "He is nothing and no one. You're safe with me."

"She could run away," Breer protested, when the European had let Carys go

off to her room to gather up her belongings.

"She will never leave me," Mamoulia replied. "I mean her no harm and she

knows it. I rocked her once, in these arms."

"Naked, was she?"

"A tiny thing: so vulnerable." His voice dropped to a near-whisper: "She

deserved better than him."

Breer said nothing; simply lolled insolently against the wall, peeling dried

blood from under his nails with a razor. He was deteriorating faster than the

European had anticipated. He'd hoped Breer would survive until all of this chaos was

over, but knowing the old man, he'd wheedle and prevaricate, and what should have

taken days would occupy weeks, by which time the Razor-Eater's condition would be

poor indeed. The European felt weary. Finding and controlling a substitute for Breer

would be a drain on his already depleted energies.

Presently, Carys came downstairs.

In some ways he regretted losing his spy in the enemy camp, but there were

too many variables remaining if he didn't take her. For one, she had

knowledge of

him, deeper knowledge than she was perhaps aware of. She knew instinctively his

terrors of the flesh; witness the way she had driven him out when she and Strauss

had been together. She knew too his weariness, his dwindling faith. But there was

another reason to take her. Whitehead had said that she was his only comfort. If

they took her now the pilgrim would be alone, and that would be agony. Mamoulion

trusted it would prove unendurable.

39

Page 309

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

After searching as much of the grounds as was lit by the floodlights, and finding no

sign of Whitehead, Marty went back upstairs. It was time to break Whitehead's

commandment, and look for the old man in forbidden territory. The door to the room

at the end of the top corridor, beyond Carys' and Whitehead's bedrooms, was closed.

Heart in mouth, Marty approached, and tapped on it.

"Sir?"

At first there was no sound from within. Then came Whitehead's voice; vague,

as if woken from sleep: "Who is it?"

"Strauss, sir."

"Come in."

Marty pushed the door gently and it swung open.

When he had imagined the interior of this room it had always been a treasure

house. But the truth was quite the reverse. The room was Spartan: its white walls

and its spare furnishings a chilly spectacle. It did boast one treasure. An

altarpiece stood against one of the bare walls, its richness quite out of place in

such an austere setting. Its central panel was a crucifixion of sublime sadism; all

gold and blood.

Its owner sat, dressed in an opulent dressing gown, at the far end of the

room, behind a large table. He looked at Marty with neither welcome nor accusation

on his face, his body slumped in the chair like a sack.

"Don't stand in the doorway, man. Come in."

Marty closed the door behind him.

"I know what you told me, sir, about never coming up here. But I was afraid

something had happened to you."

"I'm alive," Whitehead said, spreading his hands. "All's well."

"The dogs-

"-are dead. I know. Sit."

He gestured to the empty chair opposite him across the table.

"Shouldn't I call the police?"

"There's no need."

"They could still be on the premises."

Whitehead shook his head. "They've gone. Sit down, Martin. Pour yourself a

glass of wine. You look as if you've been running hard."

Marty pulled out the chair that had been neatly placed under the table and

sat down. The unadorned bulb that burned in the middle of the room threw an

unflattering light on everything. Heavy shadows, ghastly highlights: a ghost show.

"Put down the gun. You won't be needing it."

He lay the weapon down on the table beside the plate, on which there were

still several wafer-thin slices of meat. Beyond the plate, a bowl of strawberries,

partially devoured, and a glass of water. The frugality of the meal matched the

environment: the meat, sliced to the point of transparency, rare and moist; the

casual arrangement of cups and strawberry bowl. An arbitrary precision invested

everything, an eerie sense of chance beauty. Between Marty and Whitehead a mote of

dust turned in the air, fluctuating between the light bulb and table, its -direction

influenced by the merest exhalation.

"Try the meat, Martin."

"I'm not hungry."

"It's superb. My guest brought it."

"You know who they are, then."

"Yes, of course. Now eat."

Reluctantly Marty cut a piece of the slice in front of him, and tasted it.

The texture dissolved on the tongue, delicate and appetizing.

"Finish it off," Whitehead said.

Marty did as the old man had invited: the night's exertions had given him an

appetite. A glass of red wine was poured for him; he drank it down.

"Your head's full of questions, no doubt," Whitehead said. "Please ask away.

I'll do my best to answer."

"Who are they?" he asked.

"Friends."

"They broke in like assassins."

"Is it not possible that friends, with time, can become assassins?"
Marty

hadn't been prepared for that particular paradox. "One of them sat where you're

sitting now."

"How can I be, your bodyguard if I don't know your friends from your

Page 310

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

enemies?"

Whitehead paused, and looked hard at Marty.

"Do you care?" he asked after a beat.

"You've been good to me," Marty replied, insulted by the inquiry.

"What kind

of coldhearted bastard do you take me for?"

"My God . . ." Whitehead shook his head. "Marty . . ."

"Explain to me. I want to help."

"Explain what?"

"How you can invite a man who wants to kill you to eat dinner with you.

Whitehead watched the dust mote turning between them. He either thought the

question beneath contempt, or had no answer for it.

"You want to help me?" he said eventually. "Then bury the dogs."

"Is that all I'm good for?"

"The time may come-"

"So you keep telling me," Marty said, standing up. He wasn't going to

get

any answers; that much was apparent. Just meat and good wine. Tonight, that wasn't

enough.

"Can I go now?" he asked, and without waiting for a reply turned his back on

the old man and went to the door.

As he opened it, Whitehead said: "Forgive me," very quietly. So quietly in

fact that Marty wasn't sure whether the words were intended for him or not.

He closed the door behind him and went back through the house to check that

the intruders had indeed gone; they had. The steam room was empty. Carys had

obviously returned to her room.

Feeling insolent, he slipped into the study and poured himself a treble

whisky from the decanter, and then sat in Whitehead's chair by the window, sipping

and thinking. The alcohol did nothing for the clarity of his mind: it simply dulled

the ache of frustration he felt. He slipped away to bed before dawn described the

ragged bundles of fur on the lawn too distinctly.

VII.

No Limits

It was no morning for burying dead dogs; the sky was too high and promising. Jets,

trailing vapor, crossed to America, the woods budded and winged with life. Still,

the work had to be done, however inappropriate.

Only by the uncompromising light of day was it possible to see the full extent of the slaughter. In addition to killing the dogs around the house, the

intruders had broken into the kennels and systematically murdered all its occupants,

including Bella and her offspring. When Marty arrived at the kennels Lillian was

already there. She looked as though she'd been weeping for days. In her hands she

cradled one of the pups. Its head had been crushed, as if in a vise.

"Look," she said, proffering the corpse.

Marty hadn't managed to eat anything for breakfast: the thought of the job

ahead had taken the edge off his appetite. Now he wished he'd forced something down:

his empty belly echoed on itself. He felt almost lightheaded.

"If only I'd been here," she said.

"You probably would have ended up dead yourself," he told her. It was the

simple truth.

She laid the pup back on the straw, and stroked the matted fur of Bella's

body. Marty was more fastidious than she. Even wearing a pair of thick leather

gloves he didn't want to touch the corpses. But whatever he lacked in respect he

made up for in efficiency, using his disgust as a spur to hurry the work along.

Lillian, though she had insisted on being there to help, was useless in the face of

the fact. All she could do was watch while Marty wrapped the bodies in black plastic

refuse bags, loaded the forlorn parcels into the back of the jeep, and then drove

this makeshift hearse across to a clearing he'd chosen in the woods. It was here

that they were to be buried, at Whitehead's request, out of sight of the house. He'd

brought two spades, hoping that Lillian would assist, but she was clearly incapable.

He was left to do it single-handed, while she stood, hands thrust into the pockets

of her filthy anorak, staring at the leaking bundles.

It was difficult work. The soil was a network of roots, crisscrossing from

Page 311

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

tree to tree, and Marty soon worked up a sweat, hacking at the roots

with the blade

of his spade. Once he'd dug a shallow grave, he rolled the bodies into it and began

to shovel the earth back on top of them. It rattled on their plastic shrouds, a dry

rain. When the filling was done he patted the soil into a rough mound.

"I'm going back to the house for a beer," he told Lillian. "You coming?"

She shook her head. "Last respects," she muttered.

He left her among the trees and headed back across the lawn to the house. As

he walked, he thought of Carys. She must be awake by now, surely, though the

curtains at the window were still drawn. How fine to be a bird, he thought, to peer

through the gap in the curtains and spy on her stretching naked on the bed, sloth

that she was, her arms thrown up above her head, fur at her armpits, fur where her

legs met. He walked into the house wearing a smile and an erection.

He found Pearl in the kitchen, told her he was hungry, and went upstairs to

shower. When he came down again she had a cold spread laid out for him: beef, bread,

tomatoes. He dug in with a will.

"Seen Carys this morning?" he asked, mouth crammed.

"No," she replied. She was at her most uncommunicative today, her face

pinched up with some fermenting grievance. He wondered, watching her move around the

kitchen, what she was like in bed: for some reason he was full of dirty thoughts

today, as if his mind, refusing to be depressed by the burial, was eager for

uplifting sport. Chewing on a mouthful of salted beef he said:

"Was it veal you fed the old man last night?"

Pearl didn't look up from her labors as she said: "He didn't eat last night.

I left fish for him, but he didn't touch it."

"But he had meat," Marty said. "I finished it off for him. And

strawberries."

"He must have come down and got those for himself. Always strawberries," she

said. "He'll choke on them one of these days."

Now Marty came to think of it, Whitehead had said something about his guest

providing the meat.

"It was good, whatever it was," he said.

"None of my doing," Pearl said, offended as a wife discovering her husband's

adultery.

Marty put the conversation to rest; it was no use trying to raise her spirits when she was in this kind of mood.

The meal finished, he went up to Carys' room. The house was pin-drop still:

after the lethal farce of the previous night it had regained its composure. The

pictures that lined the staircase, the carpets underfoot, all conspired against any

rumor of distress. Chaos here was as unthinkable as a riot in an art gallery: all

precedent forbade it.

He knocked on Carys' door, lightly. There was no answer, so he knocked

again, more loudly this time.

"Carys?"

Perhaps she didn't want to speak to him. He'd never been able to predict

from one day to the next whether they were lovers or enemies. Her ambiguities no

longer distressed him, however. It was her way of testing him, he guessed, and it

was fine by him as long as she finally admitted that she loved him more than any

other fucker on the face of the earth.

He tried the handle; the door wasn't locked. The room beyond was empty. Not

only did it not contain Carys, it contained no trace of her existence there. Her

books, her toiletries, her clothes, her ornaments, everything that marked out the

room as hers had been removed. The sheets had been stripped from the bed, the

pillowcases from the pillow. The bare mattress looked desolate.

Marty closed the door and started downstairs. He'd asked for explanations

more than once and he'd been granted precious few. But this was too much. He wished

to God Toy was still around: at least he'd treated Marty as a thinking animal.

Luther was back in the kitchen, his feet up on the table among a clutter of

unwashed dishes. Pearl had clearly left her province to the barbarians.

"Where's Carys?" was Marty's first question.

"You never quit, do you?" Luther said. He stubbed out his cigarette on

Marty's lunch plate, and turned a page of his magazine.

Marty felt detonation approaching. He'd never liked Luther, but he'd taken

months of sly remarks from the bastard because the system forbade the kind of

response he really wanted to give. Now that system was crumbling, rapidly. Toy gone,

Page 312

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

dogs dead, heels on the kitchen table: who the hell cared any longer if he beat

Luther to pulp?

"I want to know where Carys is."

"No lady by that name here."

Marty took a step toward the table. Luther seemed to sense that his repartee

had gone sour. He slung down the magazine; the smile disappeared.

"Don't get edgy, man."

"Where is she?"

He smoothed the page in front of him, palm down across the sleek nude.

"She's gone," he said.

"Where?"

"Gone, man. That's all. You deaf, stupid, or both?"

Marty crossed the kitchen in one second flat and hauled Luther out of his

chair. Like most spontaneous violence, there was no grace in it. The ragged attack

threw them both off-balance. Luther half-fell back, an outflung arm catching a

coffee cup, which leaped and smashed as they staggered across the kitchen. Finding

his balance first, Luther brought his knee up into Marty's groin.

"Je-sus!"

"You get your fucking hands off me, man!" Luther yelled, panicked by the

outburst. "I don't want no fight with you, right?" The demands became a plea for

sanity-"Come on, man. Calm down."

Marty replied by launching himself at the other man, fists flying. A blow,

more chance than intention, connected with Luther's face, and Marty followed through

with three or four punches to stomach and chest. Luther, stepping back to avoid this

assault,- slid in cold coffee and fell. Breathless and bloodied, he stayed down on

the floor where he was safe, while Marty, eyes streaming from the blow to his balls,

rubbed his aching hands.

"Just tell me where she is . . ." he gasped.

Luther spat out a wad of blood-tinted phlegm before speaking.

"You're out of your fucking mind, man, you know that? I don't know where

she's gone. Ask the big white father. He's the one who feeds her fucking heroin."

Of course; in that revelation lay the answer to half a dozen mysteries. It

explained her reluctance to leave the old man; it explained her lassitude too, that

inability to see beyond the next day, the next fix.

"And you supply the stuff? Is that it?"

"Maybe I do. But I never addicted her, man. I never did that. That was him;

all along it was him! He did it to keep her. To fucking keep her.

Bastard." It was

spoken with genuine contempt. "What kind of father does that? I tell you, that

fucker could teach us both a few lessons in dirty tricks." He paused to finger the

inside of his mouth; he clearly had no intention of standing up again until Marty's

bloodlust had subsided. "I don't ask no questions," he said. "All I know is I had to

clear out her room this morning."

"Where's her stuff gone?"

He didn't answer for several seconds. "Burned most of it," he said finally.

"In God's name, why?"

"Old man's orders. You finished?"

Marty nodded. "I've finished."

"You and I," Luther said, "we never liked each other from the start. You

know why?"

"Why?"

"We're both shit," he said grimly. "Worthless shit. Except I know what I am.

I can even live with it. But you, you poor bastard, you think if you brown-nose

around long enough one of these days someone's going to forgive you your

trespasses."

Marty snorted mucus into his hand and wiped it on his jeans.

"Truth hurt?" Luther jibed.

"All right," Marty came back, "if you're so good with the truth maybe you

can tell me what's going on around here."

"I told you: I don't ask questions."

"You never wondered?"

"Of course I fucking wondered. I wondered every day I brought the kid
dope,

or saw the old man sweat when it started to get dark. But why should
there be any

sense to it? He's a lunatic; that's your answer. He lost his marbles
when his wife

went. Too sudden. He couldn't take it. He's been out of his mind ever
since."

Page 313

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"And that's enough to explain everything that's going on?"

Luther wiped a spot of bloody spittle off his chin with the back of his
hand. "Hear no evil, speak no evil, see no evil," he said.

"I'm no monkey," Marty replied.

41

It wasn't until the middle of the evening that the old man would
consent to see

Marty. By that time the edge had been taken off his anger, which was presumably the

intention of the delay. Whitehead had forsaken the study and the chair by the window

tonight. He sat in the library instead. The only lamp that burned in the room had

been placed a little way behind his chair. As a consequence, it was almost

impossible to see his face, and his voice was so drained of color that no clue to

his mood could be caught from it: But Marty had half-expected the theatrics, and was

prepared for them. There were questions to be asked, and he wasn't about to be

intimidated into silence.

"Where's Carys?" he demanded.

The head moved a little in the cove of the chair. The hands closed a book on

his lap and placed it on the table. One of the science fiction paperbacks; light

reading for a dark night.

"What business is it of yours?" Whitehead wanted to know.

Marty thought he'd predicted all the responses-bribery, prevarication-but

this question, throwing the onus of inquiry back onto him, he hadn't expected. It

begged other questions: did Whitehead know about his relationship with Carys, for

instance? He'd tortured himself all afternoon with the idea that she'd told him

everything, gone to the old man after that first night, and the subsequent nights,

to report his every clumsiness, every naïveté.

"I need to know," he said.

"Well, I see no reason why you shouldn't be told," the dead voice replied

"though God knows it's a private hurt. Still, there are very few people I have left

to confide in."

Marty tried to locate Whitehead's eyes, but the light behind the chair

dazzled him. All he could do was listen to the even modulation of the voice, and try

to dig out the implications beneath the flow.

"She's been taken away, Marty. At my request. Somewhere where her problems

can be dealt with in a proper manner."

"The drugs?"

"You must have realized her addiction has worsened considerably in the last

few weeks. I had hoped to contain it by giving her enough to keep her content, while

slowly reducing her supply. It was working too, until recently." He sighed; a hand

went up to his face. "I've been stupid. I should have conceded defeat a long time

ago, and sent her to a clinic. But I didn't want to have her taken from me; it was

as simple as that. Then last night-our visitors, the slaughter of the dogs-I

realized how selfish I was, subjecting her to such pressures. It's too late in the

day for possessiveness or pride. If people find out my daughter's a junkie, then so

be it."

"I see."

"You were fond of her."

"Yes."

"She's a beautiful girl; and you're lonely. She spoke warmly of you. In time

we'll have her back amongst us, I'm sure."

"I'd like to visit her."

"Again, in time. I'm told they demand isolation in the first few weeks. of

treatment. But rest assured, she's in good hands."

It was all so persuasive. But lies. Surely, lies. Carys' room had been

stripped: was that in anticipation of her being "amongst them again" in a few weeks?

This was all another fiction. Before Marty could protest, however, Whitehead was

speaking again, a measured cadence.

"You're so close to me now, Marty. The way Bill used to be. In fact, I

really think you should be welcomed into the inner circle, don't you?
I'm having a

dinner party next Sunday. I'd like you to be there. Our guest of honor."
This was

fine, flattering talk. Effortlessly, the old man had gained the upper
hand. "In the

week I think you should go down to London and buy yourself
something decent to wear.

I'm afraid my dinner parties are rather formal."

He reached for the paperback again and opened it.

Page 314

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"Here's a check." It lay in the fold of the book, already signed, ready
for

Marty. "It should cover the price of a good suit, shirts, shoes.
Whatever else you

want to treat yourself to." The check was proffered between fore and
middle finger.

"Take it, please."

Marty stepped forward and took the check.

"Thank you."

"It can be cashed at my bank in the Strand. They'll be expecting you.

Whatever you don't spend, I want you to gamble."

"Sir?" Marty wasn't certain he was hearing the invitation properly.

"I insist you gamble it, Marty. Horses, cards, whatever you like. Enjoy
it.

Would you do that for me? And when you come back you can make
an old man envious

with tales of your adventures."

So it was bribery after all. The fact of the check made Marty more
certain

than ever that the old man was lying about Carys, but he lacked the
courage to press

the issue. It wasn't just cowardice, however, that made him hold back:
it was

burgeoning excitement. He had been bribed twice. Once with the
money; again with the

invitation to gamble it. It was years since he'd had a chance like this.
Money in

abundance, and time on his hands. The day might come when he'd
hate Papa for waking

the virus in his system: but before then a fortune could be won and
lost and won

again. He stood in front of the old man with the fever already on him.

"You're a good man, Strauss." Whitehead's words rose from the
shadowed chair

like a prophet's from a cleft rock. Though he couldn't see the
potentate's face,

Marty knew he was smiling.

42

Despite her years on the sunshine island, Carys had a healthy sense of
reality. Or

had, until they took her to that cold, bare house on Caliban Street.
There, nothing

was certain anymore. It was Mamouljian's doing. That, perhaps, was the only thing

that was certain. Houses weren't haunted, only human minds. Whatever moved in the

air there, or flitted along the bare boards with the dust balls and the cockroaches,

whatever scintillated, like light on water, at the corners of her eyes, it was all

of Mamouljian's manufacture.

For three days after her arrival at the new house she had refused even to

speak to her host or captor, whichever he was. She couldn't recall why she'd come,

but she knew he'd conned her into it-his mind breathing at her neck-and she'd

resented his manipulations. Breer, the fat one, had brought her food, and, on the

second day, dope too, but she wouldn't eat or say a word. The room they'd locked her

in was quite comfortable. She had books, and a television too, but the atmosphere

was too unstable for her to be at ease. She couldn't read, nor could she watch the

inane on the box. Sometimes she found it difficult to remember her own name; it

was as if his constant proximity was wiping her clean. Perhaps he could do that.

After all, he'd got into her head, hadn't he? Surreptitiously wormed his way into

her psyche God knows how many times. He'd been in her, in her for Christ's sake, and

she'd never known.

"Don't be frightened."

It was three A.M. on the fourth day, and another sleepless night. He had

come into her room so silently she'd looked down to see if his feet were making

contact with the floor.

"I hate this place," she informed him.

"Would you like to explore, rather than being locked up in here?"

"It's haunted," she said, expecting him to laugh at her. He didn't, however.

So she went on. "Are you the ghost?"

"What I am is a mystery," he replied, "even to myself." His voice was softened by introspection. "But I'm no ghost. You may be certain of that. Don't fear

me, Carys. Anything you feel, I share, in some measure."

She remembered acutely this man's revulsion at the sex act. What a pale,

sickly thing he was, for all his powers. She couldn't bring herself to hate him,

though she had reason enough.

"I don't like to be used," she said.

"I did you no harm. I do you no harm now, do I?"

"I want to see Marty."

Mamouljian had started to try to clench his mutilated hand. "I'm afraid that's not possible," he said. The scar tissue of his hand, pulled tight, shone, but

the mishealed anatomy wouldn't give.

Page 315

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"Why not? Why won't you let me see him?"

"You'll have everything you need. Ample supplies of food; of heroin."

It suddenly crossed her mind that Marty might be on the European's execution

list. Might, in fact, already be dead.

"Please don't harm him," she said.

"Thieves come and thieves go," he replied. "I can't be responsible for what

happens to him."

"I'll never forgive you," she said.

"Yes you will," he replied, his voice so soft now it was practically

illusory. "I'm your protector now, Carys. Had I been allowed, I would have nurtured

you from childhood, and you would have been spared the humiliations he's made you

suffer. But it's too late. All I can do is shelter you from further corruption."

He gave up trying to make a fist. She saw how the wounded hand

disgusted

him. He would cut it off if he could, she thought; it's not just sex he loathes,

it's flesh.

"No more," he said, apropos of the hand, or debate, or nothing at all.

When he left her to sleep, he didn't lock the door behind him.

The next day, she began her exploration of the house. There was nothing very

remarkable about the place; it was simply a large, empty, three-story house. In the

street beyond the dirty windows ordinary people passed by, too locked in their heads

even to glance around. Though her first instinct was to knock on the glass, to mouth

some appeal to them, the urge was easily conquered by reason. If she slipped away

what would she be escaping from, or to? She had safety here, of a kind, and drugs.

Though at first she resisted them, they were too attractive to flush away down the

toilet. And after a few days of the pills, she gave in to the heroin too. It came in

steady supply: never too much, never too little, and always good stuff.

Only Breer, the fat one, upset her. He would come, some days, and watch her,

his eyes sloppy in his head like partially poached eggs. She told Mamoulia about

him, and the next day he didn't linger; just brought the pills and hurried away. And

the days flowed into one another; and sometimes she didn't remember where she was or

how she'd got here; sometimes she remembered her name, sometimes not. Once, maybe

twice, she tried to think her way to Marty, but he was too far from her. Either

that, or the house subdued her powers. Whichever, her thoughts lost their way a few

miles from Caliban Street, and she returned there sweating and afraid.

She had been in the house almost a week when things took a turn for the

worse.

"I'd like you to do something for me," the European said.

"What?"

"I'd like you to find Mr. Toy. You do remember Mr. Toy?"

Of course she remembered. Not well, but she remembered. His broken nose,

those cautious eyes that had always looked at her so sadly.

"Do you think you could locate him?"

"I don't know how to."

"Let your mind go to him. You know the way, Carys."

"Why can't you do it?"

"Because he'll be expecting me. He'll have defenses, and I'm too tired to

fight with him at the moment."

"Is he afraid of you?"

"Probably."

"Why?"

"You were a babe in arms when Mr. Toy and I last met. He and I parted as

enemies; he presumes we are still enemies . . ."

"You're going to harm him," she said.

"That's my business, Carys."

She stood, sliding up the wall against which she'd been slumped.

"I don't think I want to find him for you."

"Aren't we friends?"

"No," she said. "No. Never."

"Come now."

He stepped toward her. The broken hand touched her: the contact was feather-light.

"I think you are a ghost," she said.

Page 316

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

She left him standing in the corridor, and went up to the bathroom to think

this through, locking the door behind her. She knew without a shadow of a doubt that

he'd harm Toy if she led him to the man.

"Carys," he said quietly. He was outside the bathroom door. His proximity

made her scalp creep.

"You can't make me," she said.

"Don't tempt me."

Suddenly the European's face loomed in her head. He spoke again: "I knew you

before you could walk, Carys. I've held you in my arms, often. You've sucked on my

thumb." He was speaking with his lips close to the door; his low voice reverberated

in the wood she had her back against.

"It's no fault of yours or mine that we were parted. Believe me, I'm glad

you carry your father's gifts, because he never used them. He never once understood

the wisdom there was to be found with them. He squandered it all: for fame, for

wealth. But you . . . I could teach you, Carys. Such things."

The voice was so seductive it seemed to reach through the door and enfold

her, the way his arms had, so many years ago. She was suddenly minute in his grasp;

he cooed at her, made foolish faces to bring a cherubic smile to bloom.

"Just find Toy for me. Is it so much to ask for all my favors to you?"

She found herself rocking with the rhythm of his cradling.

"Toy never loved you," he was saying, "nobody has ever loved you."

That was a lie: and a tactical error. The words were cold water on her sleepy face. She was loved! Marty loved her. The runner; her runner.

Mamouliau sensed his miscalculation.

"Don't defy me," he said; the cooing had gone from his voice.

"Go to Hell," she replied.

"As you wish . . ."

There was a falling note in his words, as though the issue was closed and

done with. He didn't leave his station by the door, however. She felt him close. Was

he waiting for her to tire, and come out? she wondered. Persuasion by physical

violence wasn't his style, surely; unless he was going to use Breer. She hardened

herself against the possibility. She'd claw his watery eyes out.

Minutes passed, and she was sure the European was still outside though she

could hear neither movement or breath.

And then, the pipes began to rumble. Somewhere in the system, a tide was

moving. The sink made a sucking sound, the water in the toilet bowl splashed, the

toilet lid flapped open and slammed closed again as a gust of fetid air was

discharged from below. This was his doing somehow, though it seemed a vacuous

exercise. The toilet farted again: the smell was noxious.

"What's happening?" she asked under her breath.

A gruel of filth had started to seep over the lip of the toilet and dribble onto the floor. Wormy shapes moved in it. She shut her eyes. This was a fabrication,

conjured up by the European to subdue her mutiny: she would ignore it. But even with

canceled sight the illusion persisted. The water splashed more loudly as the flood

rose, and in the stream she heard wet heavy things flopping onto the bathroom floor.

"Well?" said Mamoulia.

She cursed the illusions and their charmer in one vitriolic breath.

Something skittered across her bare foot. She was damned if she was going to

open her eyes and give him another sense to assault, but curiosity forced them open.

The dribbles from the toilet had become a stream, as if the sewers had backed up and were discharging their contents at her feet. Not simply excrement and

water; the soup of hot dirt had bred monsters. Creatures that could be found in no

sane zoology: things that had been fish once, crabs once; fetuses flushed down

clinic drains before their mothers could wake to scream; beasts that fed on

excrement whose bodies were a pun on what they devoured. Everywhere in the silt

forsaken stuff, offal and dregs, raised itself on queasy limbs and flapped and

paddled toward her.

"Make them go away," she said.

They had no intention of retreat. The scummy tide still edged forward: the

fauna the toilet was vomiting up were getting larger.

"Find Toy," the voice on the other side of the door bargained. Her sweaty

hands slid on the handle, but the door refused to open. There was no hint of a

reprieve.

"Let me out."

Page 317

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"Just say yes."

She flattened herself against the door. The toilet lid flew open in the strongest gust yet, and this time stayed open. The flood thickened and the pipes

creaked as something that was almost too large for them began to force its way

toward the light. She heard its claws rake the sides of the pipes, she heard the

chatter of its teeth.

"Say yes."

"No."

A glistening arm was thrown up from the belching bowl, and flailed around

until its digits fixed on the sink. Then it began to haul itself up, its water-rotted bones rubbery.

"Please!" she screamed.

"Just say yes."

"Yes! Yes! Anything! Yes!"

As she spat out the words the handle of the door moved. She turned her back

on the emerging horror and put her weight down on the handle at the same time as her

other hand fumbled with the key. Behind her, she heard the sound of a body

contorting itself to fetch itself free. She turned the key the wrong way, and then

the right. Muck splashed on her shin. It was almost at her heels. As she opened the

door sodden fingers snatched at her ankle, but she threw herself out of the bathroom

before it could catch her, and onto the landing, slamming the door behind her.

Mamouljian, his victory won, had gone.

After that, she couldn't bring herself to go back into the bathroom. At her

request the Razor-Eater supplied a bucket for her to use, which he brought and took

away again with reverence.

The European never spoke of the incident again. There was no need. That

night she did as he had asked her. She opened up her head and went to look for Bill

Toy and, within a matter of minutes, she found him. So, soon after, did the Last

European.

43

Not since the halcyon days of his big wins at the casinos had Marty possessed so

much money as he did now. Two thousand pounds was no fortune to Whitehead, but it

raised Marty to blind heights. Perhaps the old man's story about Carys had been a

lie. If so, he'd wheedle the truth out of him in time. Slowee, slowee, catchee

monkey, as Feaver used to say. What would Feaver say to see Marty now, with money

lapping at his feet?

He left the car near Euston, and caught a cab to the Strand to cash the check. Then he went in search of a good evening suit. Whitehead had suggested an

outfitter off Regent Street. The fitters treated him with some brusqueness at first,

but once he showed them the color of his money the tune changed to sycophancy.

Curbing his smiles, Marty played the fastidious buyer; they fawned and fussed; he

let them. Only after three-quarters of an hour of their fey attentions did he alight

on something he liked: a conservative choice, but immaculately styled. The suit, and

the accompanying wardrobe-shoes, shirts, a selection of ties-bit more deeply into

the cash than he'd anticipated, but he let it go, like water, through his fingers.

The suit, and one set of accoutrements, he took with him. The rest he had sent to

the Sanctuary.

It was lunchtime when he emerged, and he wandered around looking for

somewhere to eat. There'd been a Chinese restaurant on Gerard Street that he and

Charmaine had frequented whenever funds allowed: he returned there now. Though its

facade had been modernized to accommodate a large neon sign, the interior was much

the same; the food as good as he remembered. He sat in splendid isolation and ate

and drank his way through the menu, happy to play the rich man to the hilt. He

ordered half a dozen cigars after the meal, downed several brandies and tipped like

a millionaire. Papa would be proud of me, he thought. When he was full, drunk and

satisfied, he headed out into the balmy afternoon. It was time he followed the rest

of Whitehead's instructions.

He made his way through Soho, wandering for a few minutes until he found a

betting office. As he entered the smoky interior, guilt assailed him, but he told

his spoilsport conscience to go hang. He was obeying orders in coming here.

There were races at Newmarket, Kempton Park and Doncaster-each name evoked

some bittersweet association-and he bet freely on every one on the board. Soon the

old enthusiasm had killed the last smidgen of guilt. It was like living, this game,

Page 318

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

but it tasted stronger. It dramatized, with its promised gains, its too-easy losses,

the sense he had had as a child of what adult life must be like. Of how, once one

grew out of boredom and into the secret, bearded, erectile world of manhood, every

word would be loaded with risk and promise, every breath taken won in the face of

extraordinary odds.

At first, the money dribbled away from him; he didn't bet heavily, but the

frequency of the losses began to dwindle his reserves. Then, three-quarters of an

hour into the session things took a turn for the better; horses he plucked from thin

air romped home at ridiculous odds, one after the other. In one race he made back

what he'd lost in the previous two, and more. The enthusiasm turned

to euphoria.

This was the very feeling he'd tried so hard to describe to Whitehead-
of being in

charge of chance.

Finally, the wins began to bore him. Pocketing his winnings without
taking

any proper account of them, he left. The money in his jacket was a
thick wedge; it

ached to be spent. On instinct, he sauntered through the crowds to
Oxford Street,

selected an expensive shop, and bought a nine-hundred-pound fur coat
for Charmaine,

then hailed a cab to take it to her. It was a slow journey; the wage-
slaves were

beginning to make their escape, and the roads were snarled. But his
mood forbade

irritation.

He had the taxi drop him off at the corner of the street, because he
wanted

to walk the length of it. Things had changed since he'd last been here,
two and a

half months before. Early spring was now early summer. Now, at
almost six in the

evening, the warmth of the day hadn't dissipated; there was growing
time in it

still. Nor, he thought, was it just the season that had advanced,
become riper; he

had too.

He felt real. God in Heaven, that was it. At last he was able to operate in

the world again, affect it, shape it.

Charmaine came to the door looking flustered. She looked more flustered

still when Marty stepped in, kissed her, and put the coat box in her arms.

"Here. I bought you something."

She frowned. "What is it, Marty?"

"Take a look. It's for you."

"No," she said. "I can't."

The front door was still open. She was ushering him back toward it, or at

least attempting to. But he wouldn't go. There was something beneath the look of

embarrassment on her face: anger, panic even. She pressed the box back at him,

unopened.

"Please go," she said.

"It's a surprise," he told her, determined not to be repelled.

"I don't want any surprises. Just go. Ring me tomorrow."

He wouldn't take the proffered box, and it fell between them, breaking open.

The sumptuous gleam of the coat spilled out; she couldn't help but stoop to pick it

up.

"Oh, Marty . . ." she whispered.

As he looked down at her gleaming hair someone appeared at the top of the stairs.

"What's the problem?"

Marty looked up. Flynn was standing on the half-landing, dressed only in

underwear and socks. He was unshaven. For a few seconds he said nothing, juggling

the options. Then the smile, his panacea, swarmed across his face.

"Marty," he exclaimed, "what's buzzing?"

Marty looked at Charmaine, who was looking at the floor. She- had the coat

in her arms, bundled up like a dead animal.

"I see," Marty said.

Flynn descended a few stairs. His eyes were bloodshot.

"It's not what you think. Really it isn't," he said, stopping halfway down,

waiting to see which way Marty would jump.

"It's exactly what you think, Marty," Charmaine said quietly. "I'm sorry you

had to find out like this, but you never rang. I said ring before you come round."

"How long?" Marty murmured.

"Two years, more or less."

Marty glanced up at Flynn. They'd played together with that black

girl-Ursula, was it?-only a few weeks past, and when the milk was spilt Flynn had

slid away. He'd come back here, to Charmaine. Had he washed, Marty wondered, before

Page 319

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

he'd joined Charmaine in their double bed? Probably not.

"Why him?" he found himself asking. "Why him, for Christ's sake? Couldn't

you have improved on that?"

Flynn said nothing in his own defense.

"I think you should leave, Marty," Charmaine said, clumsily attempting to

rebox the coat.

"He's such a shit," Marty said. "Can't you see what a shit he is?"

"He was there," she retorted bitterly. "You weren't."

"He's a fucking pimp, for Christ's sake!"

"Yes," she said, letting the box lie, and standing up at last, eyes furious,

to spit all the truth out. "Yes, that's right. Why do you think I took up with him?"

"No, Char-"

"Hard times, Marty. Nothing to live on but fresh air and love letters."

She'd whored for him; the fucker had made her whore. On the stairs,

Flynn

had gone a sickly color. "Hold up, Marty," he said. "No way did I make her do a damn

thing she didn't want to do."

Marty moved to the bottom of the stairs.

"Isn't that right?" Flynn appealed to Charmaine. "Tell him, woman! Did I

make you do a thing you didn't want to do?"

"Don't," Charmaine said, but Marty was already starting up the stairs. Flynn

stood his ground for two steps only, then retreated backward. "Hey, come on . . ."

Palms up, to keep the blows at bay.

"You made my wife a whore?"

"Would I do that?"

"You made my wife a fucking whore?"

Flynn turned and made a bid for the landing. Marty stumbled up the stairs

after him.

"Bastard!"

The escape ploy worked: Flynn was safely behind the door and wedging a chair

against it before Marty could get to the landing. All he could do was beat on the

panels, demanding, uselessly, that Flynn let him in. But it took only a small

interruption to spoil his anger. By the time Charmaine got to the top of the stairs

he'd left off haranguing the door, and was leaning back on the wall, eyes stinging.

She said nothing; she had neither the means nor the desire to cross the chasm

between them.

"Him," was all he could say. "Of all people."

"He's been very good to me," she replied. She had no intention of pleading

their case; Marty was the intruder here. She owed him no apology.

"It wasn't as if I walked out."

"It was your doing, Marty. You lost for both of us. I never got a say in the

matter." She was trembling, he saw, with fury, not with sorrow. "You gambled

everything we had. Every damn thing. And lost it for us both."

"We're not dead."

"I'm thirty-two. I feel twice that."

"He makes you tired."

"You're so stupid," she said, without feeling; her cool contempt withered

him. "You never saw how fragile everything was: you just went on being the way it

suited you to be. Stupid and selfish."

Marty bit at his upper lip, watching her mouth as it spoke the truth at

him.

He wanted to hit her, but that wouldn't make her any less right; just bruised and

right. Shaking his head, he stepped past her and thundered down the stairs. She was

silent above.

He passed the box, the discarded fur. They could fuck on it, he thought:

Flynn would like that. He picked up the bag containing his suit, and left. The glass

in the window rattled he slammed the door so hard.

"You can come out now," Charmaine said to the closed bedroom door. "The

shooting's over."

44

Marty couldn't get one particular thought out of his head: that she'd told Flynn all

about him: spilling the secrets of their life together. He pictured Flynn lying on

the bed with his socks on, stroking her, and laughing, as she poured out all the

dirt. How Marty'd spent all the money on horses or poker; how he'd never had a

winning streak in his life that lasted more than five minutes (you should have seen

Page 320

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

me today, he wanted to tell her, things are different now, I'm shit-hot now); how he

was only good in bed on the infrequent occasions that he'd won and uninterested the

rest of the time; how he'd first lost the car to Macnamara, then the television,

then the best of the furniture, and still owed a small fortune. How he'd then gone

out and tried to steal his way out of debt. Even that had failed miserably.

He lived the pursuit again, sharp as ever. The car smelling of the shotgun

Nygaard was nursing; the sweat on Marty's face pricking in his pores as it cooled in

the draft from the open window, fluttering up into his face like petals. It was all

so clear, it might have happened yesterday. Everything since then, almost a decade

of his life, pivoted on those few minutes. It made him almost physically sick to

think of it. Waste. All waste.

It was time to get drunk. The money he had left in his pocket-still well

into four figures-was burning a hole, demanding to be spent or gambled. He wandered

down to the Commercial Road, and hailed another cab, not entirely certain of what to

do next. It was barely seven; the night ahead needed careful planning. What would

Papa do? he thought. Betrayed and shat on, what would the great man do?

Whatever his heart desired, came the answer; whatever his fucking heart

desired.

He went to Euston Station and spent half an hour in the bathroom there,

washing and changing into the new shirt and new suit, emerging transformed. The

clothes he'd been wearing he gave to the attendant, along with a ten-pound note.

Some of the old mellowness had crept back into his system by the time he'd

changed. He liked what the mirror told him: the evening might turn out to be a

winner yet, as long as he didn't whip it too hard. He drank in Covent Garden, enough

to lace his blood and breath with spirits, then had a meal in an Italian restaurant.

When he came out the theaters were emptying; he garnered a clutch of appreciative

glances, mostly from middle-aged women and well-coiffured young men. I probably look

like a gigolo, he thought; there was a disparity between his dress and his face that

signaled a man playing a role. The thought pleased him. From now on he would play

Martin Strauss, man of the world, with all the bravura he could muster. Being

himself had not got him very far. Perhaps a fiction would improve his rate of

advancement.

He idled down Charing Cross Road and into the tangle of traffic and pedestrians at Trafalgar Square. There'd been a fight on the steps on St.

Martin's-in-the-Field; two men were exchanging curses and accusations while their

wives looked on.

Off the square, at the back of the Mall, the traffic quietened. It took him

several minutes to orient himself. He knew where he was going, and had thought he

knew how to get there, but now he wasn't so certain. It was a long time since he'd

been in the area, and when he eventually hit the small mews that contained the

Academy-Bill Toy's club-it was more by chance than design.

His heart beat a little faster as he sauntered up the steps. Ahead lay a major piece of playacting, which, if it failed, would ruin the evening. He paused a

moment to light a cigar, then entered.

In his time he'd frequented a number of high-class casinos; this one had the

same slightly passé grandeur as others he'd been in; dark-wood paneling, damson

carpeting, portraits of forgotten luminaries on the walls. Hand in

trouser pocket,

jacket unbuttoned to reveal the gloss of the lining, he crossed the mosaic foyer to

the desk. Security would be tight: the moneyed expected safety. He wasn't a member,

nor could expect to become one on the spot: not without sponsors and references. The

only way he'd get a good night's gaming was by bluffing his way through.

The English rose at the desk smiled promisingly. "Good evening, sir."

"How are you tonight?"

Her smile didn't falter for a moment, even though she couldn't possibly know

who he was.

"Well. And you?"

"Lovely night. Is Bill here yet?"

"I'm sorry, sir?"

"Mr. Toy. Has he arrived yet?"

"Mr. Toy." She consulted the guest book, running a lacquered finger down the

list of tonight's gamblers. "I don't think he's-

"He won't have signed in," Marty said. "He's a member, for God's sake." The

slight irritation in his voice took the girl off-balance.

"Oh . . . I see. I don't think I know him."

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"Well, no matter. I'll just go straight up. Tell him I'm at the tables, will you?"

"Wait, sir. I haven't-"

She reached out, as if to tug at his sleeve, but thought better of it. He flashed her a disarming smile as he started up the stairs.

"Who shall I say?"

"Mr. Strauss," he said, affecting a tiny barb of exasperation.

"Yes. Of course." Artificial recognition flooded her face. "I'm sorry,

Mr. Strauss. It's just that-"

"No problem," he replied, benignly, as he left her below, staring up at him.

It took him only a few minutes to acquaint himself with the layout of the

rooms. Roulette, poker, blackjack; all and more were available. The atmosphere was

serious: frivolity was not welcome where money could be won or lost on such a scale.

If the men and few women who haunted these hushed enclaves were here to enjoy

themselves they showed no sign of it. This was work; hard, serious work. There were

some quiet exchanges on the stairs and in the corridors-and of course calls from the

tables, otherwise the interior was almost reverentially subdued.

He sauntered from room to room, standing on the fringe of one game then

another, familiarizing himself with the etiquette of the place. Nobody gave him more

than a glance; he fitted into this obsessive's paradise too well.

Anticipation of the moment when he eventually sat down to join a game

exhilarated him; he indulged it a while longer. He had all night to enjoy, after

all, and he knew only too well that the money in his pocket would disappear in

minutes if he wasn't careful. He went into the bar, ordered a whisky and water, and

scanned his fellow drinkers. They were all here for the same reason: to pit their

wits against chance. Most drank alone, psyching themselves up for the games ahead.

Later, when fortunes had been won, there might be dancing on the tables, an

impromptu striptease from a drunken mistress. But it was early yet.

The waiter appeared. A young man, twenty at most, with a mustache that

looked drawn on; he'd already achieved that mixture of obsequiousness and

superiority that marked his profession.

"I'm sorry, sir-" he said.

Marty's stomach lurched. Was somebody going to call his bluff?

"Yes?"

"Scotch or bourbon, sir?"

"Oh. Er . . . Scotch."

"Very well, sir."

"Bring it to the table."

"Where will you be, sir?"

"Roulette."

The waiter withdrew. Marty went to the cashier and bought eight hundred

pounds of chips, then went into the roulette room.

He'd never been much of a card-player. It required techniques that he'd

always been too bored to learn; and much as he admired the skill of great players,

that very skill blurred the essential confrontation. A good cardplayer used luck, a

great one rode it. But roulette, though it too had its systems and its techniques,

was a purer game. Nothing had the glamor of the spinning wheel: its numbers

blurring, the ball rattling as it lodged and jumped again.

He sat down at the table between a highly perfumed Arab who spoke only

French, and an American. Neither said a word to him: there were no welcomes or

farewells here. All the niceties of human intercourse were sacrificed to the matter

at hand.

It was an odd disease. Its symptoms were like infatuation-palpitations, sleeplessness. Its only certain cure, death. On one or two occasions he'd caught

sight of himself in a casino bar mirror or in the glass of the cashier's booth, and

met a hunted, hungry look. But nothing-not self-disgust, not the disparagement of

friends-nothing had ever quite rooted out the appetite.

The waiter brought the drink to his elbow, its ice clinking. Marty tipped

him heavily.

There was a spin of the wheel, though Marty had joined the table too late to

place money. All eyes were fixed on the circling numbers . . .

It was an hour or more before Marty left the table, and then only to relieve his

bladder before returning to his seat. Players came and went. The American, indulging

Page 322

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

the aquiline youth who accompanied him, had left the decisions to his companion, and

lost a small fortune before retiring. Marty's reserves were running low. He'd won,

and lost, and won; then lost and lost and lost. The defeats didn't distress him

overmuch. It wasn't his money, and as Whitehead had often observed, there was plenty

more where that came from. With enough chips left for one more bet of any

consequence, he withdrew from the table for a breather. He'd sometimes found that he

could change his luck by retiring from the field for a few minutes and returning

with new focus.

As he got up from his seat, his eyes full of numbers, somebody walked past

the door of the roulette room and glanced in before moving on to another game.

Fleeting seconds were enough for recognition.

When Marty'd last met that face it had been ill-shaven and waxen with pain,

lit by the floods along the Sanctuary fence. Now Mamouliau was transformed. No

longer the derelict, cornered and anguished. Marty found himself walking toward the

door like a man hypnotized. The waiter was at his side-"Another drink, sir?"-but the

inquiry went ignored as Marty stepped out of the roulette room and into the

corridor. Contrary feeling ran in him: he was half-afraid to confirm his sighting of

the man, yet curiously excited that the man was here. It was no coincidence, surely.

Perhaps Toy was with him. Perhaps the whole mystery would unravel here and now. He

caught sight of Mamouljian walking into the baccarat room. A particularly fierce

match was going on there, and spectators had drifted in to watch its closing stages.

The room was full; players from other tables had deserted their own games to enjoy

the battle at hand. Even the waiters were lingering on the periphery trying to catch

a glimpse.

Mamouljian threaded his way through the crowd to get a better view, his thin

gray figure parting the throng. Having found himself a vantage point he stood, light

shining up from the baize onto his pale face. The wounded hand was lodged in his

jacket pocket, out of sight; the wide brow was clear of the least expression. Marty

watched him for upward of five minutes. Not once did the European's eyes flicker

from the game in front of him. He was like a piece of porcelain: a glazed façade

onto which a nonchalant artisan had scrawled a few lines. The eyes pressed into the

clay were incapable, it seemed, of anything but that relentless stare. Yet there was

power in the man. It was uncanny to see how people kept clear of him, cramming

themselves into knots rather than press too close to him at the table.

Across the room, Marty caught sight of the pen-mustache waiter. He pushed

his way between the spectators to where the young man stood.

"A word," he whispered.

"Yes, sir?"

"That man. In the gray suit."

The waiter glanced toward the table, then back to Marty

"Mr. Mamoulion."

"Yes. What do you know about him?"

The waiter gave Marty a reproving look.

"I'm sorry, sir. We're not at liberty to discuss members."

He turned on his heel and went into the corridor. Marty followed. It was

empty. Downstairs, the girl on the desk-not the same he'd spoken with-was giggling

with the coat-check clerk.

"Wait a moment."

When the waiter looked back, Marty was producing his wallet, still amply

enough filled to present a decent bribe. The other man stared at the notes with

undisguised greed.

"I just want to ask a few questions. I don't need the number of his bank

account."

"I don't know it anyway." The waiter smirked. "Are you police?"

"I'm just interested in Mr. Mamouljian," Marty said, proffering fifty pounds

in tens. "Some bare essentials."

The waiter snatched the money and pocketed it with the speed of a practiced

bribee.

"Ask away," he said.

"Is he a regular here?"

"A couple of times a month."

"To play?"

The waiter frowned.

"Now you mention it I don't think I've ever seen him actually play."

Page 323

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"Just to watch, then?"

"Well, I can't be sure. But I think if he did play I'd have seen him by now.

Strange. Still, we have a few members who do that."

"And does he have any friends? People he arrives with, leaves with?"

"Not that I remember. He used to be quite pally with a Greek woman who used

to come in. Always won a fortune. Never failed."

That was the gambler's equivalent of the fisherman's tale, the story of the

player with a system so flawless it never faltered. Marty had heard it a hundred

times, always the friend of a friend, a mythical somebody whom you never got to meet

face-to-face. And yet; when he thought of Mamoulia's face, so calculating in its

supreme indifference, he could almost imagine the fiction real.

"Why are you so interested in him?" the waiter asked.

"I have an odd feeling about him."

"You're not the only one."

"What do you mean?"

"He's never said or done anything to me, you understand," the waiter

explained. "He always tips well, though God knows all he ever drinks is distilled

water. But we had one fellow came here, this is a couple of years ago now, he was

American, over from Boston. He saw Mamoulia and let me tell you- he freaked out.

Seems he'd played with a guy who was his spitting image, this is in the 1920s. That

caused quite a buzz. I mean, he doesn't look like the type to have a father, does

he?"

The waiter had something there. It was impossible to imagine this Mamoulia

as a child or a pimply adolescent. Had he suffered infatuation, the death of pets,

of parents? It seemed so unlikely as to be laughable.

"That's all I know, really."

"Thank you," said Marty. It was enough.

The waiter walked away, leaving Marty with an armful of possibilities.

Apocryphal tales, most likely: the Greek with the system, the panicking American. A

man like Mamoulia was bound to collect rumors; his air of lost aristocracy invited

invented histories. Like an onion, unwrapped and unwrapped and unwrapped again, each

skin giving way not to the core but to another skin.

Tired, and dizzy with too much drink and too little sleep, Marty decided to

call it a night. He'd use the hundred or so left in his wallet to bribe a taxi

driver to drive him back to the estate, and leave the car to be picked up another

day. He was too drunk to drive. He glanced one final time into the baccarat room.

The game was still going on; Mamoulia had not moved from his station.

Marty went downstairs to the bathroom. It was a few degrees colder

than the

interior of the club, its rococo plasterwork facetious in the face of its lowly

function. He glanced at his weariness in the mirror, then went to relieve himself at

the urinal.

In one of the stalls, somebody had begun to sob, very quietly, as if

attempting to stifle the sound. Despite his aching bladder, Marty found he was

unable to piss; the anonymous grief distressed him too much. It was coming from

behind the locked door of the stalls. Probably some optimist who'd lost his shirt on

a roll of the dice, and was now contemplating the consequences. Marty left him to

it. There was nothing he could say or do; he knew that from bitter experience.

Out in the foyer, the woman on the desk called after him.

"Mr. Strauss?" It was the English rose. She showed no sign of wilting, despite the hour. "Did you find Mr. Toy?"

"No, I didn't."

"Oh, that's odd. He was here."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. He came with Mr. Mamoulian. I told him you were here, and that you'd

asked after him."

"And what did he say?"

"Nothing," the girl replied. "Not a word." She dropped her voice. "Is he well? I mean, he looked really terrible, if you don't mind me saying so. Awful

color."

Marty glanced up the stairs, scanned the landing.

"Is he still here?"

"Well, I haven't been on the desk all evening, but I didn't see him leave."

Marty took the stairs two at a time. He wanted to see Toy so much. There

were questions to ask, confidences to exchange. He scoured the rooms, looking for

Page 324

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

that worn-leather face. But though Mamouljian was still there, sipping his water, Toy

was not with him. Nor was he to be found in any of the bars. He had clearly come and

gone. Disappointed, Marty went back downstairs, thanked the girl for her help,

tipped her well, and left.

It was only when he had put a good distance between himself and the Academy,

walking in the middle of the road to waylay the first available taxi, that he

remembered the sobbing in the bathroom. His pace slowed. Eventually he stopped in

the street, his head echoing to the thump of his heart. Was it just hindsight, or

had that ragged voice sounded familiar, as it chewed on its grief? Had it been Toy

sitting there in the questionable privacy of a toilet stall, crying like a lost

child?

Dreamily, Marty glanced back the way he'd come. If he suspected Toy was

still at the club, shouldn't he go back and find out? But his head was making

unpleasant connections. The woman at the Pimlico number whose voice was too horrid

to listen to; the desk-girl's question: "Is he well?"; the profundity of despair he

had heard from behind the locked door. No, he couldn't go back. Nothing, not even

the promise of a faultless system to beat every table in the house, would induce him

to return. There was, after all, such a thing as reasonable doubt; and on occasion

it could be a balm without equal.

VIII.

Raising Cain

The day of the Last Supper, as he was to come to think of it, Marty shaved three

times, once in the morning and twice in the afternoon. The initial flattery of the

invitation had long since faded. Now all he prayed for was some convenient get-out

clause, a means by which he could politely escape what he was certain would be an

excruciating evening. He had no place in Whitehead's entourage. Their values were

not his; their world was one in which he was no more than a functionary. There could

be nothing about him that would give them more than a moment's entertainment.

It wasn't until he put on the evening jacket again that he began to feel

more courageous. In this world of appearances, why shouldn't he carry off the

illusion as well as the next man? After all, he'd succeeded at the Academy. The

trick was to get the superficialities right-the proper dress code, the correct direction

in which to pass the port. He began to view the evening ahead as a test of his wits,

and his competitive spirit began to rise to the challenge. He would play them at

their own game, among the clinking glasses and the chatter of opera and high

finance.

Triply shaved, dressed and cologned, he went down to the kitchen.
Oddly,

Pearl wasn't in the house: Luther had been left in charge of the night's
gourmandizing. He was opening bottles of wine: the room was
fragrant with the

mingled bouquets. Though Marty had understood the gathering to be
small, several

dozen bottles were assembled on the table; the labels on many were
dirtied to

illegibility. It looked as though the cellar were being stripped of its
finest

vintages.

Luther looked Marty up and down.

"Who'd you steal the suit off?"

Marty picked up one of the open bottles and sniffed it, ignoring the
remark.

Tonight he wasn't going to be needed: tonight he had things figured
out, and he'd

let no one burst the bubble.

"I said: where'd you-"

"I heard you first time. I bought it."

"What with?"

Marty put the bottle down heavily. Glasses on the table clinked
together.

"Why don't you shut up?"

Luther shrugged. "Old man give it to you?"

"I told you. Shove it."

"Seems to me you're getting in deep, man. You know you're guest of honor at

this shindig?"

"I'm going along to meet some of the old man's friends, that's all."

"You mean Dwoskin and those fuckheads? Aren't you the lucky one?"

"And what are you tonight: the wine-boy?"

Page 325

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

Luther grimaced as he pulled the cork on another bottle. "They don't have no

waiters at their special parties. They're very private."

"What do you mean?"

"What do I know?" Luther said, shrugging. "I'm a monkey, right?"

Between eight and eight-thirty, the cars started to arrive at the Sanctuary.

Marty waited in his room for a summons to join the rest of the guests. He heard

Curtsinger's voice, and those of women; there was laughter, some of it shrill. He

wondered if it was just the wives they'd brought, or their daughters too.

The phone rang.

"Marty." It was Whitehead.

"Sir?"

"Why not come up and join us? We're waiting for you."

"Right."

"We're in the white room." Another surprise. That bare room, with its ugly

altarpiece, seemed an unlikely venue for a dinner party.

Evening was drawing on outside, and before going on up to the room, Marty

switched the lawn floods on. They blazed, their illumination echoing through the

house. His earlier trepidation had been entirely replaced by a mixture of defiance

and fatalism. As long as he didn't spit in the soup, he told himself, he'd get

through.

"Come on in, Marty."

The atmosphere inside the white room was already chokingly thick with cigar

and cigarette smoke. No attempt had been made to prettify the place. The only

decoration was the triptych: its crucifixion as vicious as Marty remembered it.

Whitehead stood as Marty entered, and extended his hand in welcome, an almost garish

smile on his face.

"Close the door, will you? Come on in and sit down."

There was a single empty place at the table. Marty went to it.

"You know Felix, of course."

Ottaway, the fan-dancing lawyer, nodded. The bare bulb threw light on his

pate, and exposed the line of his toupee.

"And Lawrence."

Dwoskin-the lean and trollish-was in the middle of a sip of wine. He murmured a greeting.

"And James."

"Hello," said Curtsinger. "How nice to see you again." The cigar he held was

just about the largest Marty had ever set eyes on.

The familiar faces accounted for, Whitehead introduced the three women who

sat between the men.

"Our guests for tonight," he said.

"Hello."

"This is my sometime bodyguard, Martin Strauss."

"Martin." Oriana, a woman in her mid-thirties, gave him a slightly crooked

smile. "Pleased to meet you."

Whitehead used no second name, which left Marty wondering if this was the

wife of one of the men, or just a friend. She was a good deal younger than either

Ottaway or Curtsinger, between whom she sat. Perhaps she was a

mistress. The thought

tantalized.

"This is Stephanie."

Stephanie, the first woman's senior by a good ten years, graced Marty with a

look that seemed to strip him naked from head to foot. It was disconcertingly plain,

and he wondered if anyone else around the table had caught it.

"We've heard so much about you," she said, laying a caressing hand on

Dwoskin's. "Haven't we?"

Dwoskin smirked. Marty's distaste for the man was as thoroughgoing as ever.

It was difficult to imagine how or why any human would want to touch him.

"-And, finally, Emily."

Marty turned to greet the third new face at the table. As he did so, Emily

knocked over a glass of red wine.

"Oh Jesus!" she said.

"Doesn't matter," Curtsinger said, grinning. He was already drunk, Marty now

registered; the grin was too lavish for sobriety. "Couldn't matter less, sweet.

Really it couldn't."

Emily looked up at Marty. She too had already drunk too much, to judge by

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

her flushed complexion. She was by far the youngest of the three women, and almost

winsomely pretty.

"Sit down. Sit down," Whitehead said. "Never mind the wine, for God's sake."

Marty took his place beside Curtsinger. The wine Emily had spilled dribbled off the

edge of the table, unarrested.

"We were just saying-" Dwoskin chimed in, "what a pity Willy couldn't have

been here."

Marty shot a glance at the old man to see if the mention of Toy-the sound of

weeping came back as he thought of him-had brought any response. There was none. He

too, Marty now saw, was the worse for drink. The bottles that Luther had been

opening-the clarets, the burgundies-forested the table; the atmosphere was more that

of an ad hoc picnic rather than a dinner party. There was none of the ceremony he'd

anticipated: no meticulous ordering of courses, no cutlery in regiments. What food

there was-tins of caviar with spoons thrust into them, cheeses, thin biscuits-took a

poor second place to the wine. Though Marty knew little about wine his suspicions

about the old man emptying his cellar were confirmed by the babble around the table.

They had come together tonight to drink the Sanctuary dry of its finest, its most

celebrated, vintages.

"Drink!" Curtsinger said. "It's the best stuff you'll ever swallow, believe me." He fumbled for a specific bottle among the throng. "Where's the Latour? We

haven't finished it, have we? Stephanie, are you hiding it, darling?"

Stephanie looked up from her cups. Marty doubted if she even knew what

Curtsinger was talking about. These women weren't wives, he was certain of it. He

doubted if they were even mistresses.

"Here!" Curtsinger sloppily filled a glass for Marty. "See what you make of

that."

Marty had never much liked wine. It was a drink to be sipped and swilled

around the mouth, and he had no patience with it. But the bouquet off the glass

spoke quality, even to his uneducated nose. It had a richness that made him salivate

before he'd downed a mouthful, and the taste didn't disappoint: it was superb.

"Good, eh?"

"Tasty."

"Tasty," Curtsinger bellowed to the table in mock outrage. "The boy pronounces it tasty."

"Better pass it back over before he downs the lot," Ottaway remarked.

"It's all got to go," Whitehead said, "tonight."

"All of it?" said Emily, glancing over at the two dozen other bottles that

stood against the wall: liqueurs and cognacs among the wines.

"Yes, everything. One blowout, to finish the best of the stuff."

What was this about? They were like a retreating army razing a place rather

than leaving anything for those who followed to occupy.

"What are you going to drink next week?" Oriana asked, a heaped spoonful of

caviar hovering above her cleavage.

"Next week?" Whitehead said. "No parties next week. I'm joining a monastery." He looked across at Marty. "Marty knows what a troubled man I am."

"Troubled?" said Dwoskin.

"Concerned for my immortal soul," said Whitehead, not taking his eyes off

Marty. This earned a spluttered guffaw from Ottaway, who was rapidly losing control

of himself.

Dwoskin leaned across and refilled Marty's glass. "Drink up," he said.

"We've got a lot to get through."

There was no slow savoring of the wine going on around the table: the glasses were being filled, guzzled and refilled as though the tipples were water.

There seemed something desperate in their appetite. But he should have known

Whitehead did nothing by halves. Not to be outdone, Marty downed his second glass in

two gulps, and filled it to brimming again immediately.

"Like it?" Dwoskin asked.

"Willy would not approve," said Ottaway.

"What; of Mr. Strauss?" Oriana said. The caviar had still not found her mouth.

"Not of Martin. Of this indiscriminate consumption-"

He was barely able to get his tongue around the last two words. There was

some pleasure in seeing the lawyer tongue-twisted, no more the FanDancer.

"Toy can go fuck himself," Dwoskin said. Marty wanted to say something in

Page 327

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

Bill's defense, but the drink had slowed his responses and before he could speak

Whitehead had lifted his glass. "A toast," he announced.

Dwoskin stumbled to his feet, knocking over an empty bottle which in turn

felled another three. Wine gurgled out of one of the spilled bottles, weaving across

the table and splashing on to the floor.

"To Willy!" Whitehead said, "wherever he is."

Glasses raised and tapped together, even Dwoskin's. A chorus of voices offered up

"To Willy!"

-and the glasses were noisily drained. Marty's glass was filled up by Ottaway.

"Drink, man, drink!"

The drink, on Marty's empty stomach, was causing ructions. He felt dislocated from events in the room: from the women, the Fan-Dancer, the crucifixion

on the wall. His initial shock seeing the men like this, wine on their bibs and

chins, mouthing obscenities, had long since faded. Their behavior didn't matter.

Getting more of these vintages down his throat did. He exchanged a baleful look with

Christ. "Fuck you," he said under his breath.

Curtsinger caught the comment. "My very words," he whispered back.

"Where is Willy?" Emily was asking. "I thought he'd be here."

She offered the question to the table, but nobody seemed willing to take it

up.

"He's gone," Whitehead replied eventually.

"He's such a nice man," the girl said. She dug Dwoskin in the ribs.

"Didn't

you think he was a nice man?"

Dwoskin was irritated by the interruptions. He had taken to fumbling at the

zipper on the back of Stephanie's dress. She made no objection to this public

advance. The glass he held in the other hand was spilling wine into his lap. He

either didn't notice or didn't care.

Whitehead caught Marty's eye.

"Entertaining you, are we?" he said.

Marty wiped the nascent smile off his face.

"Don't you approve?" Ottaway asked Marty.

"Not up to me."

"I always got the impression the criminal classes were quite puritanical at

heart. Is that right?"

Marty looked down from the Fan-Dancer's drink-puffed features and shook his

head. The jibe was beneath contempt, as was the jiber.

"If I were you, Marty," Whitehead said from the other end of the table, "I'd

break his neck."

Marty shrugged. "Why bother?" he said.

"Seems to me, you're not so dangerous after all," Ottaway went on.

"Who said I was dangerous?"

The smirk the lawyer wore deepened. "I mean. We were expecting an animal

act, you know?" Ottaway moved a bottle to get a better look at Marty. "We were

promised-" The conversation around the table had ground to a halt, but Ottaway

didn't seem to notice. "Still, nothing's quite as advertised, is it?" he said. "I

mean, you ask any one of these godforsaken gentlemen." The table was a still-life;

Ottaway's arm swept around to include everyone in his tirade. "We know, don't we? We

know how disappointing life can be."

"Shut up," Curtsinger snapped. He stared woozily at Ottaway. "We don't want

to hear."

"We may not get another chance, my dear James," Ottaway replied, his

courtesy contemptuous. "Don't you think we should all admit the truth? We are in

extremis! Oh yes, my friends. We should all get down on our knees

and confess!"

"Yes, yes," said Stephanie. She was trying to stand but her legs were of another mind. Her dress, the back unzipped, threatened to slip. "Let's all confess,"

she said.

Dwoskin pulled her back into her chair.

"We'll be here all night," he said. Emily giggled. Ottaway, undeterred, was

still talking.

"Seems to me," he said, "he's probably the only innocent one amongst us."

Ottaway pointed at Marty. "I mean, look at him. He doesn't even know what I'm

talking about."

Page 328

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

The remarks were beginning to irritate Marty. But there'd be precious little

satisfaction in threatening the lawyer. In his present state Ottaway would crumble

under one blow. His bleary eyes didn't look far from unconsciousness. "You

disappoint me," Ottaway murmured, with genuine regret in his voice, "I thought we'd

end better than this . . ."

Dwoskin stood up. "I've got a toast," he announced. "I want to toast the

women."

"Now there's an idea," Curtsinger said. "But we'll need a fire." Oriana thought this the funniest remark she'd heard all night.

"The women!" Dwoskin declared, raising his glass. But nobody was listening.

Emily, who had been lamblike so far, had suddenly taken it into her head to strip

off. She'd pushed her chair back and was now unbuttoning her blouse. She wore

nothing beneath; her nipples looked rouged, as if in preparation for this unveiling.

Curtsinger applauded; Ottaway and Whitehead joined in with a chorus of encouraging

remarks.

"What do you think?" Curtsinger asked Marty. "Your type, is she? And they're

all her own, aren't they, sweetheart?"

"You want to feel?" Emily offered. She'd discarded her blouse; she was now

naked from the waist up. "Come on," she said, taking hold of Marty's hand and

pressing it against her breast, working it around and around.

"Oh, yes," said Curtsinger, leering at Marty. "He likes that. I can tell he likes that."

"Of course he does," Marty heard Whitehead say. His gaze, not too focused,

slid in the old man's direction. Whitehead met it head-on: the hooded eyes were

devoid of humor or arousal. "Go on," he said. "She's all yours. That's what she's

here for." Marty heard the words but couldn't make proper sense of them. He pulled

his hand off the girl's flesh as if scalded.

"Go to Hell," he said.

Curtsinger had stood up. "Now don't be a spoilsport," he rebuked Marty, "we

only want to see what you're made of."

Down the table, Oriana had started to laugh again, Marty wasn't sure at

what. Dwoskin was banging his hand, palm down, on the table. The bottles jumped in

rhythm.

"Go on," Whitehead told Marty. They were all looking at him. He turned to

face Emily. She was standing a yard away from him, attempting the catch of her

skirt. There was something undeniably erotic about her exhibitionism. Marty's

trousers felt tight: his head too. Curtsinger had his hands on Marty's shoulders and

was trying to slip off his jacket. The tattoo Dwoskin was beating on the table,

which Ottaway had now taken up, made Marty's head dance.

Emily had succeeded with the catch, and her skirt was at her feet.
Now,

without prompting, she pulled off her panties and stood in front of the
assembled

company wearing only pearls and high-heeled shoes. Naked, she
looked young enough to

be jailbait: fourteen, fifteen, at most. Her skin was creamy.
Somebody's

hand-Oriana's, he thought, was massaging Marty's erection. He half-
turned: it wasn't

her at all, but Curtsinger. He pushed the hand away. Emily had
stepped toward him

and was unbuttoning his shirt from the bottom up. He tried to stand to
say something

to Whitehead. The words weren't there yet, but he badly wanted to
find them: wanted

to tell the old man what a cheat he was. More than a cheat: he was
scum;

dirty-minded scum. This was why he'd been invited up here, plied
with wine and dirty

talk. The old man had wanted to see him naked and rutting.

Marty pushed Curtsinger's hand away a second time: the touch was
horribly

expert. He looked along the table to Whitehead, who was pouring
himself another

glass of wine. Dwoskin's gaze was fixed on Emily's nakedness;
Ottaway's on Marty.

Both had given up slapping the table. The lawyer's stare said
everything: he was

sickly pale, sweaty anticipation on his face.

"Go on," he said, his breath ragged, "go on, take her. Give us a show to remember. Or haven't you got anything worth displaying?"

Marty heard the sense too late to reply; the naked child was pressing herself against him, and somebody (Curtsinger) was trying to unbutton the top of his

trousers. He made one last, ungainly lunge at equilibrium.

"Stop this," he murmured, looking at the old man.

"What's the problem?" Whitehead asked lightly..

"Joke over," Marty said. There was a hand in his trousers, reaching for his

erection. "Get the fuck off me!" He shoved Curtsinger back with more force than he'd

Page 329

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

planned. The big man stumbled and fell against the wall. "What's wrong with you

people?" Emily took a step back from him to avoid Marty's flailing arm. The wine was

boiling up in his belly and throat. His trousers juttred. He looked, he knew, absurd.

Oriana was still laughing: riot just her, Dwoskin too, and Stephanie. Ottaway just

stared.

"You never seen a fucking hard-on before?" he spat at them all.

"Where's your sense of humor?" Ottaway said. "We just want a floor show.

Where's the harm?"

Marty jabbed a finger in Whitehead's direction. "I trusted you," he said. It

was all he could find to shape his hurt.

"That was an error then, wasn't it?" Dwoskin commented. He spoke as if to an

imbecile.

"You fucking shut up!" Fighting back the urge to break somebody's

face-anybody's would do-Marty pulled on his jacket, and with one backswipe of his

hand cleared a dozen bottles, most of them full, off the table. Emily screamed as

they shattered around her feet, but Marty didn't wait to see how much damage he'd

done. He backed off from the table and stumbled toward the door. The key was in the

lock; he opened it and stepped into the hallway. Behind him Emily had begun to bawl

like a baby just woken from a nightmare; he could hear her all the way down the

darkened corridor. He hoped to God his jittering limbs would bear him up. He wanted

out: into the air, into the night. He lurched down the back staircase, hand

outstretched against the wall for support, the steps receding beneath his feet. He

reached the kitchen having fallen only once, and opened the back door. The night was

waiting. Nothing to see him; nothing to know him. He breathed in cold black air, and

it burned in his nostrils and lungs. He staggered across the lawn, almost blind, not

knowing which direction he was going in, until he thought of the woods. Taking a

moment to reorientate himself, he ran toward them, begging their discretion.

46

He ran, the undergrowth dragging at his legs, until he was so deep in the stand of

trees he could see neither the house nor its lights. Only then did he stop, his

whole body thumping like one vast heart. His head felt loose on his neck; bile

gurgled at the back of his throat.

"Jesus. Jesus. Jesus."

For a moment, his gyrating head lost control: his ears whined, his eyes

blurred. He was suddenly certain of nothing, not even his physical existence. Panic

crawled up from his bowels, raking the tissue of his gut and his stomach as it came.

"Get down," he told it. Only once before had he felt so close to losing his

mind-to throwing back his head and screaming-and that had been the first night at

Wandsworth, the first of many years of nights locked in a cell twelve by eight. He'd

sat on the edge of the mattress and felt what he was feeling now. The blind beast

ascending, squeezing adrenaline from his spleen. He'd mastered the terror then, and

he could do it again. Brutally, he stuck his fingers as far down his throat as he

could reach, and was rewarded with a surge of nausea. The reflex begun, he let his

body do the rest, throwing up a system full of undigested wine. It was a filthy,

cleansing experience, and he made no effort to control the spasms until there was

nothing left to vomit.

His stomach muscles aching from the contractions, he uprooted some ferns and

wiped his mouth and chin, then washed his hands in the damp soil and stood up. The

rough treatment had done its job; there was a marked improvement in his condition.

He turned his back on his spilled stomach and wandered further away from the

house. Though the thatch of leaves and branches was heavy above, some starlight

trickled down, enough illumination to give a tenuous solidity to trunk and brush.

Walking in the ghost-wood enchanted him. He let the gentle spectacle of light and

leafshade heal his wounded vanity. He saw how all his dreams of finding a permanent

and trusted place in

Whitehead's world had been pretension. He was, and always would be, a marked man.

He walked quietly here, where the trees thickened and the undergrowth,

light-starved, thinned. Small animals scuttled ahead of him; night insects whirled

in the grass. He stood still to hear the nocturne better. As he did so he caught a

movement out of the corner of his eye. He looked toward it, seeking focus through

the receding corridor of trunks. It was no trick. There was somebody, gray as the

trees, standing thirty or so yards from him-now still, now moving again.

Concentrating, he fixed the figure in the matrix of shadow and deeper shadow.

Page 330

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

It was a ghost surely. So quiet, so casual. He watched it as a deer might

watch a hunter; not certain if he had been seen but unwilling to break cover. Fear

ran in his scalp. Not of an open blade; he'd long ago faced those terrors and

mastered them. This was the prickly heat fear of child-hood; the

essential fear. And

paradoxically, it made him whole. It didn't matter if he were four or thirty-four,

he was the same creature at heart.

He'd dreamed of such woods, of such encompassing night. He touched his

terror reverently, frozen to the spot, while the gray figure-too taken with its own

business to notice him-watched the earth between the trees.

They stood in that relation, ghost and he, for what seemed like several minutes. Certainly a good time passed before he heard a noise that was neither owl,

nor rodent, filtering between the trees. It had been there all along, he had just

failed to interpret it for what it was: the sound of digging. The rattle of tiny

stones, the fall of earth. The child in him said bad: leave it be, leave it all be.

But he was too curious to ignore it. He took two experimental steps toward the

ghost. It made no sign of seeing or hearing him. Taking courage, he advanced a few

more steps, attempting to keep as close to a tree as possible, so that should the

ghost look his way he could find cover quickly. In this way he advanced ten yards

toward his quarry. Close enough to see the host in enough detail for recognition.

It was Mamouliau.

The European was still staring down at the earth at his feet. Marty slid into hiding behind a trunk and flattened himself there, his back to the scene. There

was obviously somebody digging, at Mamouliau's feet; he conceivably had other

cohorts in the vicinity. The only safety was in lying doggo and hoping to God no one

had been spying on him as he had spied on the European.

At length the digging stopped; and so, as if on an unspoken cue, did the

nocturne. It was bizarre. The whole assembly, insect and animal alike, seemed to

hold its breath, aghast.

Marty slid down the trunk into crawling position, his ears straining for every clue as to what was going on. He chanced a look. Mamouliau was moving off in

what Marty guessed to be the direction of the house. Undergrowth obscured his view:

he could see nothing of the digger, or the other disciples who were accompanying the

European. He heard their passage, however; the brush of their dragging steps. Let

them go, he thought. He was past protecting Whitehead. That bargain was defunct.

He sat, knees hugged against his chest, and waited until Mamouliau had woven

between the trees and disappeared. Then he counted to twenty and stood up. Pins and

needles pricked at his lower legs, and he had to rub the circulation back into them.

Only then did he start toward the spot where Mamouliau had lingered.

Even as he approached he recognized the glade, though he had previously come

to it from the direction of the house. His late-evening walk had taken him in a

semicircle. He was standing now in the place he'd buried the dogs.

The grave was open and empty; the black plastic shrouds had been torn apart,

their contents unceremoniously removed. Marty stared into the hole not quite

comprehending the joke. What use were dead dogs?

There was a movement in the grave; something shifted beneath the plastic

sheets. He stepped back from the edge, his gorge too susceptible for this. A nest of

maggots presumably, or perhaps a worm the size of his arm, grown fat on dogmeat; who

knew what hid in the earth?

Turning his back on the hole, he walked toward the house, following the

trail Mamouliau had taken, until the trees thinned and the starlight brightened.

There, on the borderland between wood and lawn, he stayed, until the

sounds of the

night reestablished themselves around him.

47

Stephanie excused herself from the table, and went out to the bathroom, leaving the

hysteria behind her. As she closed the door one of the men-Ottaway, she

thought-suggested she come back in and piss in a bottle for him. She didn't grace

the remark with a reply. However well they paid, she wasn't going to get involved in

that kind of activity; it wasn't clean.

The hallway was in semidarkness; the sheen of vases, the richness of the

carpet underfoot-all of it spoke wealth, and on previous visits she'd enjoyed the

extravagance of the place. But tonight they were so uneasy-Ottaway, Dwoskin, the old

man himself-there was an air of desperation in their drinking and their innuendo,

and it took any pleasure out of being here. On the other nights they'd all got

Page 331

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

pleasantly drunk and then there'd been the usual performances, sometimes developing

into something more serious with one or two of them. Just as often

they were content

to watch. And at the end of the night there'd been generous payment.
But tonight was

different. There was cruelty in it, which she disliked. Money or no
money, she

wouldn't come here again. It was time she retired anyway; leave it to
younger girls,

who at least looked less raddled than she did.

She bent close to the bathroom mirror and tried to reapply her
eyeliner, but

her hand was shaky with drink, and it slipped. She cursed, and dug in
her purse for

a tissue to clean off the error. As she did so there was a scuffling
sound in the

hallway. Dwoskin, she guessed. She didn't want the gargoyle touching
her again, at

least not until she was too paralytic with drink to care. She tiptoed to
the door

and locked it. The sounds outside had stopped. She went back to the
sink and turned

on the tap; cold water, to splash on her tired face.

Dwoskin had gone out after Stephanie. He intended to suggest
something

outrageous for her to perform on him, something gross for this night-
of nights.

"Where are you going?" somebody asked him, as he traipsed the hall,
or did

he just imagine the words? He'd taken a few pills before the party-that

always

loosened him up-but it tended to put voices in his head, mostly his mother's.

Whether somebody had asked the question or not, he chose not to answer; he just

wandered down the corridor, calling for Stephanie. The woman was extraordinary, or

so his drugged libido had decided. She had superb buttocks. He wanted to be

smothered by those cheeks; to die under them.

"Stephanie," he demanded. She didn't reappear. "Come on," he reassured her,

"it's only me."

There was a smell in the corridor: just a hint of sewer. He inhaled it.

"Foul," he announced, not unappreciatively. The smell was getting stronger, as

though its source was close by, and approaching. "Lights," he told himself and

peered along the wall looking for a switch.

A few yards down the corridor something started to move toward him. The

light was too dim to see properly by, but it was a man, and the man was not alone.

There were other shapes, knee-high, mustering in the darkness. The smell was

becoming overpowering. Dwoskin's head had started to dance with color; disgraceful

images flickered in the air to accompany the smell. It took him a moment to grasp

that this air graffiti was not his doing. It was coming from the man ahead of him.

Dashes and dots of light flared and whirled away into the air.

"Who are you?" Dwoskin demanded. In answer, the graffiti ignited into a

full-blown literature. Not certain if any sound was coming out, the Troll-King began

to screech.

Stephanie dropped the eyeliner into the sink as the scream reached her. She didn't

recognize the voice. It was high enough to be a woman's, but it was neither Emily

nor Oriana.

The shakes suddenly worsened. She held on to the edge of the sink to steady

herself as the noises multiplied: howls now, and running feet. Somebody was

shouting; all but incoherent orders. It was Ottaway, she thought, but she wasn't

going out to check. Whatever was going on beyond the door-pursuit, capture, murder

even-she needed none of it. She turned off the light in the bathroom in case it

spilled under the door. Somebody ran by, calling on God: now there was desperation.

Feet thudded down the stairs; somebody fell. Doors slammed: screams

mounted.

She backed away from the door and sat on the edge of the bath.
There, in the

darkness, she started to sing "Abide with Me"-or what little she could
remember of

it-very quietly.

Marty heard the screams too, though he didn't want to. Even at such a
distance, they

carried a freight of blind panic that made him clammy.

He knelt down in the dirt between the trees and stopped his ears. The
earth

smelled ripe beneath him, and his mind seethed with unwelcome
thoughts of lying

faceup in the ground, dead perhaps, but anticipating resurrection. Like
a sleeper on

the verge of waking, nervous of the day.

After a while the din became intermittent. Soon, he told himself, he
must

open his eyes, stand up and go back to the house to see the hows and
the whys of all

this commotion. Soon; but not yet.

When the noise in the hallway and on the stairs had long stopped,
Stephanie crept to

Page 332

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

the bathroom door, unlocked it and peered out. The corridor was in
complete darkness

now. The lamps had either been turned off or shattered. But her eyes, accustomed to

the blackness of the bathroom, soon pierced the feeble light from the stairwell. The

gallery was empty in both directions. There was just a smell in the air like a bad

butcher's shop on a hot day.

She slipped off her shoes, and started to the top of the stairs. The

contents of a handbag were scattered down the steps, and there was something wet

underfoot. She looked down: the carpet was stained: either wine or blood. She

hurried on down into the hallway. It was chilly; both front and vestibule doors were

wide open. Again, there was no sign of life. The cars had gone from the driveway;

the downstairs rooms-library, reception rooms, kitchen-all were forsaken. She rushed

back upstairs to collect her belongings from the white room and leave.

As she retraced her steps along the gallery she heard a soft padding behind

her. She turned. There was a dog at the top of the stairs; it had presumably

followed her up. She could scarcely make it out in the bad light, but she wasn't

afraid. "Good boy," she said, glad of its living presence in the abandoned house.

It didn't growl, nor did it wag its tail, it simply hobbled towards her.

Only then did she realize her error in welcoming it. The butcher's shop was here, on

all fours: she backed off.

"No . . ." she said, "I don't . . . oh, Christ . . . leave me alone."

Still it came; and with every step it took toward her she saw more of its

condition. The innards that looped from its underside. The decayed face, all teeth

and putrescence. She headed toward the white room, but it covered the distance

between them in three strides. Her hands slid on its body as it leaped at her, and

to her disgust fur and flesh separated, her grasp skinning the creature's flanks.

She fell back; it advanced, head rocking uneasily on its scrappy neck, its jaws

closing around her throat and shaking her. She couldn't scream-it was devouring her

voice-but her arm thrust up into the cold body and found its spine. Instinct made

her grasp the column, muscle dividing in slimy threads, and the beast let her go,

arching back as her grip snapped one vertebrae from the next. It let out a prolonged

hiss as she dragged her arm out. Her other hand cupped her throat: blood was hitting

the carpet with thudding sounds: she must get help or bleed to death.

She started to crawl back toward the top of the stairs. Miles away

from her,

somebody opened a door. Light fell across her. Too numb to feel pain, she looked

around. Whitehead was silhouetted in a distant doorway. Between them stood the dog.

Somehow, it had got up, or rather its front portion had, and it was dragging itself

across the shining carpet toward her, most of its bulk useless now, its head barely

raised from the ground. But still moving, as it would move until its resurrector

granted it rest.

She raised her arm to signal her presence to Whitehead. If he saw her in the

gloom he made no sign.

She had reached the top of the stairs. She had no strength left in her.

Death was coming quickly. Enough, her body said, enough. Her will conceded, and she

slumped down, the blood, loosed from her wounded neck, flowing down the stairs as

her darkening eyes watched. One step, two steps.

Counting games were a perfect cure for insomnia.

Three steps, four.

She didn't see the fifth step, or any other in the creeping descent.

Marty was loath to go back into the house, but whatever had happened there was

surely over, and he was getting chilly where he knelt. His expense-account suit was

dirtied beyond reclamation; his shirt was stained and torn, his immaculate shoes

clay-caked. He looked like a derelict. The thought almost pleased him.

He meandered back across the lawn. He could see the lights of the house

somewhere ahead. They burned reassuringly, though he knew such reassurance was

delusion. Not every house was a refuge. Sometimes it was safer to be out in the

world, under the sky, where no one could come knocking and looking for you, where no

roof could fall on your trusting head.

Halfway between house and trees a jet growled overhead, high up, its lights

twin stars. He stood and watched it pass over him at his zenith. Perhaps it was one

of the monitoring planes that he'd read passed perpetually over Europe-one American,

one Russian-their electric eyes scanning the sleeping cities; judgmental twins upon

whose benevolence the lives of millions depended. The sound of the jet diminished to

a murmur, and then to silence. Gone to spy on other heads. The sins of England would

not prove fatal tonight, it seemed.

He began to walk toward the house with fresh resolution, taking a route that

would lead him around to the front and into the false day of the floodlights. As he

crossed the stage toward the front door the European stepped out of the house.

There was no way to avoid being seen. Marty stood, rooted to the spot, while

Breer emerged, and the two unlikely companions moved away from the house. Whatever

job they'd come to do was clearly completed.

A few steps across the gravel Mamoulia glanced around. His eyes found Marty

immediately. For a long moment the European simply stared across the expanse of

bright grass. Then he nodded, a short, sharp nod that was simply acknowledgment. I

see you, it said, and look! I do you no harm. Then he turned and walked away, until

he and the gravedigger were obscured by the cypresses that lined the drive.

Part Four

THE THIEF'S TALE

Civilisations do not degenerate through fear, but because they forget that fear

exists.

Marty stood in the hallway and listened for footsteps or voices. There were neither.

The women had obviously gone, as had Ottaway, Curtsinger and the Troll-King. Perhaps

the old man too.

Few lights burned in the house. Those that did rendered the place almost

two-dimensional. Power had been unleashed here. Its remnants skittered in the

metalwork; the air had a bluish tinge. He made his way upstairs. The second floor

was in darkness, but he found his way along it by instinct, his feet kicking the

porcelain shards-some smashed treasure or other-as he went. There was more than

porcelain underfoot. Things damp, things torn. He didn't look down, but made his way

toward the white room, anticipation mounting with every step.

The door was ajar, and a light, not electric but candle, burned inside. He

stepped over the threshold. The single flame offered a panicky illumination-his very

presence had it jumping-but he could see that every bottle in the room had been

smashed. He stepped into a swamp of broken glass and spilled wine: the room was

pungent with the dregs. The table had been overturned and several of the chairs

reduced to match-wood.

Old Man Whitehead was standing in the corner of the room. There were

spatters of blood on his face, but it was difficult to be certain if it was his. He

looked like a man pictured in the aftermath of an earthquake: shock had bled his

features white.

"He came early," he said, disbelief in every hushed syllable. "Imagine that.

I thought he believed in covenants. But he came early to catch me out."

"Who is he?"

He wiped tears from his cheeks with the heel of his hand, smearing the

blood. "The bastard lied to me," he said.

"Are you hurt?"

"No." Whitehead said, as if the question were utterly ridiculous. "He wouldn't lay a hand on me. 'He knows better than that. He wants me to go willingly,

you see?"

Marty didn't.

"There's a body in the hallway," Whitehead observed matter-of-factly. "I

moved her off the stairs."

"Who?"

"Stephanie."

"He killed her?"

"Him? No. His hands are clean. You could drink milk from them."

"I'll call the police."

"No!"

Whitehead took several ill-advised steps through the glass to catch Marty's

arm.

"No! No police."

Page 334

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"But somebody's dead."

"Forget her. You can hide her away later, eh?" His tone was almost

ingratiating, his breath, now he was close, toxic. "You'll do that, won't you?"

"After all you've done?"

"A little joke," Whitehead said. He tried a smile; his grip on Marty's arm

was blood-stopping. "Come on; a joke, that's all." It was like being buttonholed by

an alcoholic on a street corner.

Marty loosed his arm. "I've done all I'm going to do for you," he said.

"You want to go back home, is that it?" Whitehead's tone soured on an instant. "Want to go back behind bars where you can hide your head?"

"You've tried that trick."

"Am I getting repetitive? Oh, dear. Oh, Christ in Heaven." He waved Marty

away. "Go on then. Piss off; you're not in my class." He staggered back to the

crutch of the wall and leaned there. "What the fuck am I doing, expecting you to

take a stand?"

"You set me up," Marty snarled in reply, "all along!"

"I told you . . . a joke."

"Not just tonight. All along. Lying to me . . . bribing me. You said you needed someone to trust, and then you treat me like shit. No wonder they all run out

on you in the end!"

Whitehead wheeled on him. "All right," he shouted back, "what do you want?"

"The truth."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, damn you, yes!"

The old man sucked at his lip, debating with himself. When he spoke again,

the voice had quietened. "All right, boy. All right." The old glitter flared in his

eyes, and momentarily the defeat was burned away by a new enthusiasm. "If you're so

eager to hear, I'll tell you." He pointed a shaky finger at Marty. "Close the door."

Marty kicked a smashed bottle out of the way, and pushed the door shut. It

was bizarre to be closing the door on murder simply to listen to a story. But this

tale had waited so long to be told; it could be delayed no longer.

"When were you born, Marty?"

"In 1948. December."

"The war was over."

"Yes."

"You don't know what you missed.

It was an odd beginning for a confession.

"Such times."

"You had a good war?"

Whitehead reached for one of the less damaged chairs and righted it; then he

sat down. For several seconds he didn't say anything.

"I was a thief, Marty," he said at last. "Well . . . black marketeer has a

more impressive ring, I suppose, but it amounts to the same thing. I was able to

speak three or four languages adequately, and I was always quick-witted. Things fell

my way very easily."

"You were lucky."

"Luck had no bearing on it. Luck's out for people with no control. I had

control; though I didn't know it at the time. I made my own luck, if you like." He

paused. "You must understand, war isn't like you see in the cinema; or at least my

war wasn't. Europe was falling apart. Everything was in flux. Borders were changing,

people were being shipped into oblivion: the world was up for grabs." He shook his

head. "You can't conceive of it. You've always lived in a period of relative

stability. But war changes the rules you live by. Suddenly it's good to hate, it's

good to applaud destruction. People are allowed to show their true selves-"

Marty wondered where this introduction was taking them, but Whitehead was

just getting into the rhythm of his telling. This was no time to divert him.

"-and when there's so much uncertainty all around, the man who can shape his

own destiny can be king of the world. Forgive the hyperbole, but it's how I felt.

King of the World. I was clever, you see. Not educated, that came later, but clever.

Streetwise, you'd call it now. And I was determined to make the most of this

wonderful war God had sent me. I spent two or three months in Paris, just before the

Occupation, then got out while the going was good. Later on, I went south. Enjoyed

Italy; the Mediterranean. I wanted for nothing. The worse the war became the better

it was for me. Other people's desperation made me into a rich man.

Page 335

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"Of course I frittered the money away. Never really held onto my earnings

for more than a few months. When I think of the paintings I had through my hands,

the objets d'art, the sheer loot. Not that I knew that when I pissed in the bucket I

splashed a Raphael. I bought and sold these things by the jeepload."

"Towards the end of the European war I took off north, into Poland. The

Germans were in a bad way: they knew the game was coming to an end, and I thought I

could strike a few deals. Eventually-it was an error really-I wound up in Warsaw.

There was practically nothing left by the time I got there. What the Russians hadn't

flattened, the Nazis had. It was one wasteland from end to end." He sighed, and

pulled a face, making an effort to find the words. "You can't imagine it," he said.

"This had been a great city. But now? How can I make you understand? You have to see

through my eyes, or none of this makes sense."

"I'm trying," Marty said.

"You live in yourself," Whitehead went on. "As I live in myself. We have

very strong ideas of what we are. That's why we value ourselves; by what's unique in

us. Do you follow what I'm saying?"

Marty was too involved to lie. He shook his head.

"No; not really."

"The isness of things: that's my point. The fact that everything of any value in the world is very specifically itself. We celebrate the individuality of

appearance, of being, and I suppose we assume that some part of that individuality

goes on forever, if only in the memories of the people who experienced it. That's

why I valued Evangeline's collection, because I delight in the special thing. The

vase that was unlike any other, the carpet woven with special artistry."

Then suddenly, they were back in Warsaw-

"There'd been such glories there, you know. Fine houses; beautiful churches;

great collections of paintings. So much. But by the time I arrived it was all gone,

pounded to dust.

"Everywhere you walked it was the same. Underfoot there was muck. Gray muck.

It caked your boots, its dust hung in the air, it coated the back of your throat.

When you sneezed, your snot was gray; your shit the same. And if you looked closely

at that filth you could see it wasn't just dirt, it was flesh, it was rubble, it was

porcelain fragments, newspapers. All of Warsaw was in that mud. Its houses, its

citizens, its art, its history: all ground down to something that you scraped off

your boots."

Whitehead was hunched up. He looked his seventy years; an old man lost in

remembering. His face was knotted up, his hands were fists. He was older than

Marty's father would have been had he survived his lousy heart: except that his

father would never have been able to speak this way. He'd lacked the power of

articulation, and, Marty thought, the depth of pain. Whitehead was in agonies. The

memory of muck. More than that: the anticipation of it.

Thinking of his father, of the past, Marty alighted upon a memory that

made

some sense of Whitehead's reminiscences. He'd been a boy of five or six when a woman

who'd lived three doors down the terrace died. She'd had no relatives apparently, or

none that cared sufficiently to remove what few possessions she'd had from the

house. The council had reclaimed the property and summarily emptied it, carting off

her furniture to be auctioned. The day after, Marty and his playmates had found some

of the dead woman's belongings dumped in the alley behind the row of houses. The

council workmen, pressed for time, had simply emptied all the drawers of worthless

personal effects into a pile, and left them there. Bundles of ancient letters

roughly tied up with faded ribbon; a photograph album (she was there repeatedly: as

a girl; as a bride; as a middle-aged harriidan, diminishing in size as she dried up);

much valueless bric-a-brac; sealing wax, inkless pens, a letter opener. The boys had

fallen on these leavings like hyenas in search of something nourishing. Finding

nothing, they scattered the torn-up letters down the alley; they dismembered the

album, and laughed themselves silly at the photographs, although some superstition

in them prevented them tearing those. They had no need to do so. The elements soon

vandalized them more efficiently than their best efforts could have done. In a week

of rain and night-frost the faces on the photographs had been spoiled, dirtied arid

finally eroded entirely. Perhaps the last existing portraits of people now dead went

to mush in that alley, and Marty, passing down it daily, had watched the gradual

extinction; seen the ink on the scattered letters rained off until the old woman's

memorial was gone away utterly, just as her body had gone. If you'd upended the tray

that held her ashes onto the trampled remains of her belongings they would have been

Page 336

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

virtually indistinguishable: both gray dirt, their significance irretrievably lost.

Muck held the whip hand.

All this Marty recalled mistily. It wasn't quite that he saw the letters,

the rain, the boys-as much as retouching the feelings the events had aroused: the

buried sense that what had happened in that alley was unbearably poignant. Now his

memory meshed with Whitehead's. All the old man had said about muck, about the

isness of things, made some sense.

"I see," he murmured.

Whitehead looked up at Marty.

"Perhaps," he said.

"I was a gambling man in those days; far more than I am now. War brings it

out in you, I think. You hear stories all the time, about how some lucky man escaped

death because he sneezed, or died for the same reason. Tales of benign providence,

or fatal bad fortune. And after a while you get to look at the world a little

differently: you begin to see chance at work everywhere. You become alive to its

mysteries. And of course to its flip side; to determinism. Because take it from me

there are men who make their own luck. Men who can mold chance like putty. You

talked yourself of feeling a tingle in your hands. As though today, whatever you

did, you couldn't lose."

"Yes . . ." That conversation seemed an age away; ancient history.

"Well, while I was in Warsaw, I heard about a man who never once lost a

game. A card-player."

"Never lost?" Marty was incredulous.

"Yes, I was as cynical as you. I treated the stories I heard as fable, at least for a while. But wherever I went, people told me about him. I got to be

curious. In fact I decided to stay in the city, though God knows there was precious

little to keep me there, and find this miracle worker for myself."

"Who did he play against?"

"All comers, apparently. Some said he'd been there in the last days before

the Russian advance, playing against Nazis, and then when the Red Army entered the

city he stayed on."

"Why play in the middle of nowhere? There can't have been much money

around."

"Practically none. The Russians were betting their rations, their boots."

"So again: why?"

"That's what fascinated me. I couldn't understand it either. Nor did I believe he won every game, however good a player he was."

"I don't see how he kept finding people to play him."

"Because there's always somebody who thinks he can bring the champion down.

I was one. I went searching for him to prove the stories wrong. They offended my

sense of reality, if you like. I spent every waking hour of every day searching the

city for him. Eventually I found a soldier who'd played against him, and of course

lost. Lieutenant Konstantin Vasiliev."

"And the card-player . . . what was his name?"

"I think you know . . ." Whitehead said.

"Yes," Marty replied, after a moment. "Yes, you know I saw him. At Bill's

club?"

"When was this?"

"When I went to buy my suit. You told me to gamble what was left of the

money."

"Mamouljian was at the Academy? And did he play?"

"No. Apparently he never does."

"I tried to get him to play, when he came here last, but he wouldn't."

"But in Warsaw? You played him there?"

"Oh, Yes. That's what he'd been waiting for. I see that now. All these years

I pretended I was in charge, you know? That I'd gone to him, that I'd won by my own

skills-"

"You won?" Marty exclaimed.

"Certainly I won. But he let me. It was his way of seducing me, and it

worked. He made it look difficult, of course, to give some weight to the illusion,

but I was so full of myself I never once contemplated the possibility that he'd lost

the game deliberately. I mean, there was no reason for him to do that, was there?

Not that I could see. Not at the time."

"Why did he let you win?"

Page 337

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"I told you: seduction."

"What, do you mean he wanted you in bed?"

Whitehead made the gentlest of shrugs. "It's possible, yes." The thought

seemed to amuse him; vanity bloomed on his face. "Yes, I think I probably was a

temptation." Then the smile faded. "But sex is nothing, is it? I mean, as possessions go, to fuck somebody is trite stuff. What he wanted me for went far

deeper and was far more permanent than any physical act."

"Did you always win when you played him?"

"I never played against him again, that was the first and only time. I know

it sounds unlikely. He was a gambler and so was I. But as I told you, he wasn't

interested in cards for the betting."

"It was a test."

"Yes. To see if I was worthy of him. Fit to build an Empire. After the war,

when they started rebuilding Europe, he used to say there were no real Europeans

left-they'd all been wiped out by one holocaust or another-and he was the last of

the line. I believed him. All the talk of Empires and traditions. I was flattered to

be lionized by him. He was more cultured, more persuasive, more penetrating than any

man I had met or have met since." Whitehead was lost in this reverie, hypnotized by

the memory. "All that's left now is a husk, of course. You can't really appreciate

what an impression he made. There was nothing he couldn't have been or done if he'd

put his mind to it. But when I said to him: why do you bother with the likes of me,

why don't you go into politics, some sphere where you can wield power directly, he'd

give me this look, and say: it's all been done. At first I thought he meant those

lives were predictable. But I think he meant something else. I think he was telling

me that he'd been these people, done those things."

"How's that possible? One man."

"I don't know. It's all conjecture. It was from the beginning. And here I am

forty years later, still juggling rumors."

He stood up. By the look on his face it was obvious that his sitting position had caused some stiffness in the joints. Once he was upright, he leaned

against the wall, and put his head back, staring up at the blank ceiling.

"He had one great love. One all-consuming passion. Chance. It obsessed him.

`All life is chance,' he used to say. `The trick is learning how to use it.

"And all this made sense to you?"

"It took time; but I came to share his fascination over a period of years,

yes. Not out of intellectual interest. I've never had much of that. But because I

knew it could bring power. If you can make Providence work for you"- he glanced down

at Marty-"work out its system if you like-the world succumbs to you." The voice

soured. "I mean, look at me. See how well I've done for myself . . ." He let out a

short, bitter laugh. ". . . He cheated," he said, returning to the beginning of

their conversation. "He didn't obey the rules."

"This was to be the Last Supper," Marty said. "Am I right? You were going to

escape before he came for you."

"In a way."

"How?"

Whitehead didn't reply. Instead he began the story again, where he'd left

off.

"He taught me so much. After the war we traveled around for a while, picking

up a small fortune. Me with my skills, him with his. Then we came to England, and I

went into chemicals."

"And got rich."

"Beyond the dreams of Croesus. It took a few years, but the money came, the

power came."

"With his help."

Whitehead frowned at this unwelcome observation. "I applied his principles,

yes," he replied. "But he prospered every bit as much as I did. He shared my houses,

my friends. Even my wife."

Marty made to speak, but Whitehead cut him off.

"Did I tell you about the lieutenant?" he said.

"You mentioned him. Vasiliev."

"He died, did I tell you that?"

"He didn't pay his debts. His body was dragged out of the sewers of Warsaw."

"Mamouliau killed him?"

"Not personally. But yes, I think-" Whitehead stopped in midflow, almost

Page 338

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

cocked his head, listening. "Did you hear something?"

"What?"

"No. It's all right. In my head. What was I saying?"

"The lieutenant."

"Oh, yes. This piece of the story . . . I don't know if it'll mean too much

to you . . . but I have to explain, because without it the rest doesn't quite make

sense. You see, the night I found Mamouliau was an incredible evening. Useless to

try to describe it really, but you know the way the sun can catch the tops of

clouds; they were blush-colored, love-colored. And I was so full of myself, so

certain that nothing could ever harm me." He stopped and licked his lips before

going on. "I was an imbecile." Self-contempt stung the words from him. "I walked

through the ruins-smell of putrefaction everywhere, muck under my feet-and I didn't

care, because it wasn't my ruin, my putrefaction. I thought I was above all that:

especially that night. I felt like the victor, because I was alive and the dead were

dead." The words stopped pressing forward for a moment. When he spoke again, it was

so quietly it hurt the ears to catch the words. "What did I know? Nothing at all."

He covered his face with his shaking hand, and said, "Oh, Jesus," quietly into it.

In the silence that followed, Marty thought he heard something outside the

door: a movement in the hallway. But the sound was too soft for him to be certain,

and the atmosphere in the room demanded his absolute fixedness. To move now, to

speak, would ruin the confessional, and Marty, like a child hooked by a master

storyteller, wanted to hear the end of this narrative. At that moment it seemed to

him more important than anything else.

Whitehead's face was concealed behind his hand as he attempted to stem

tears. After a moment he took up the tail of the story again-carefully, as if it

might strike him dead.

"I've never told anyone this. I thought if I kept my silence-if I let it become another rumor-sooner or later it would disappear."

There was another noise in the hall, a whine like wind through a tiny

aperture. And then, a scratching at the door. Whitehead didn't hear it. He was in

Warsaw again, in a house with a bonfire and a flight of steps and a room with a

table and a guttering flame. Almost like the room they were in now, in fact, but

smelling of old fire rather than souring wine.

"I remember," he said, "when the game was over Mamoulian stood up and shook

hands with me. Cold hands. Icy hands. Then the door opened behind me. I half-turned

to see. It was Vasiliev."

"The lieutenant?"

"Horribly burned."

"He'd survived," Marty breathed.

"No," came the reply. "He was quite dead."

Marty thought maybe he'd missed something in the story that would justify

this preposterous statement. But no; the insanity was presented as plain truth.

"Mamoulian was responsible," Whitehead went on. He was trembling, but the tears had

stopped, boiled away by the glare of the memory. "He'd raised the lieutenant from

the dead, you see. Like Lazarus. He needed functionaries, I suppose."

As the words faltered the scratching began again at the door, an

unmistakable appeal for entry. This time Whitehead heard it. His moment of weakness

had passed, apparently. His head jerked up. "Don't answer it," he commanded.

"Why not?"

"It's him," he said, eyes wild.

"No. The European's gone. I saw him leave."

"Not the European," Whitehead replied. "It's the lieutenant. Vasiliev."

Marty looked incredulous. "No," he said.

"You don't know what Mamoulia can do."

"You're being ridiculous!"

Marty stood up, and picked his way through the glass. Behind him, he heard

Whitehead say "no" again, "please, Jesus, no," but he turned the handle and opened

the door. Meager candlelight found the would-be entrant.

It was Bella, the Madonna of the kennels. She stood uncertainly on the threshold, her eyes, what was left of them, turned balefully up to look at Marty,

her tongue a rag of maggoty muscle that hung from her mouth as if she lacked the

strength to withdraw it. From somewhere in the pit of her body, she exhaled a thin

whistle of air, the whine of a dog seeking human comfort.

Marty took two or three stumbling steps back from the door.

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"It isn't him," Whitehead said, smiling.

"Jesus Christ."

"It's all right, Martin. It isn't him."

"Close the door!" Marty said, unable to move and do it himself. Her eyes,

her stench, kept him at bay.

"She doesn't mean any harm. She used to come up here sometimes, for tidbits.

She was the only one of them I trusted. Vile species."

Whitehead pushed himself away from the wall and walked across to the door,

kicking broken bottles ahead of him as he went. Bella shifted her head to look at

him, and her tail began to wag. Marty turned away, revolted, his reason thrashing

around to find some sane explanation, but there was none to be had. The dog had been

dead: he'd parceled her up himself. There was no question of premature burial.

Whitehead was staring at Bella across the threshold.

"No, you can't come in," he told her, as if she were a living thing.

"Send it away," Marty groaned.

"She's lonely," the old man replied, chiding him for his lack of compassion.

It crossed Marty's mind that Whitehead had lost his wits. "I don't believe this is

happening," he said.

"Dogs are nothing to him, believe me."

Marty remembered watching Mamoulion standing in the woods, staring down at

the earth. He had seen no gravedigger because there'd been none. They'd exhumed

themselves; squirming out of their plastic shrouds and pawing their way to the air.

"It's easy with dogs," Whitehead said. "Isn't it, Bella? You're trained to obey."

She was sniffing at herself, content now that she'd seen Whitehead. Her God

was still in his Heaven, and all was well with the world. The old man left the door

ajar, and turned back to Marty.

"There's nothing to be afraid of," he said. "She's not going to do us any harm."

"He brought them to the house?"

"Yes; to break up my party. Pure spite. It was his way of reminding me what

he's capable of."

Marty stooped and righted another chair. He was shaking so violently, he

feared if he didn't sit down he'd fall down.

"The lieutenant was worse," the old man said, "because he didn't obey like

Bella. He knew what had been done to him was an abomination. That made him angry."

Bella had woken with an appetite. That was why she'd made her way up to the

room she remembered most fondly; a place where a man who knew the best spot to

scratch behind her ear would coo soft words to her and feed her morsels off his

plate. But tonight she'd come up to find things changed. The man was odd with her,

his voice jangling, and there was someone else in the room, one she vaguely knew the

scent of, but couldn't place. She was still hungry, such deep hunger, and there was

an appetizing smell very close to her. Of meat left in the earth, the way she liked

it, still on the bone and half gone to putrescence.. She sniffed, almost blind,

looking for the source of the smell, and having found it, began to eat.

"Not a pretty sight."

She was devouring her own body, taking gray, greasy bites from the decayed

muscle of her haunch. Whitehead watched as she pulled at herself. His passivity in

the face of this new horror broke Marty.

"Don't let her!" he pushed the old man aside.

"But she's hungry," he responded, as though this horror were the most natural sight in the world.

Marty picked up the chair he'd been sitting on and slammed it against the

wall. It was heavy, but his muscles were brimming, and the violence was a welcome

release. The chair broke.

The dog looked up from her meal; the meat she was swallowing fell from her

cut throat.

"Too much," Marty said, picking up a leg of the chair and crossing the room

to the door before Bella could register what he intended. At the last moment she

seemed to understand that he meant her harm, and tried to get to her feet. One of

her back legs, the haunch almost chewed through, would no longer support her, and

she staggered, teeth bared, as Marty swung his makeshift weapon down on her. The

force of his blow shattered her skull. The snarling stopped. The body backed off,

dragging the ruined head on a rope of a neck, the tail tucked between its back legs

Page 340

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

in fear. Two or three trembling steps of retreat and it could go no

further.

Marty waited, hoping to God he wouldn't have to strike a second time.
As he

watched the body seemed to deflate. The swell of its chest, the
remnants of its

head, the organs hanging in the vault of its torso all collapsed into an
abstraction, one part indistinguishable from the next. He closed the
door on it, and

dropped the blooded weapon at his side.

Whitehead had taken refuge across the room. His face was as gray as
Bella's

body.

"How did he do this?" Marty said. "How is it possible?"

"He has power," Whitehead stated. It was as simple as that,
apparently. "He

can steal life, and he can give it."

Marty dug in his pocket for the linen handkerchief he'd bought
specially for

this night of dining and conversation. Shaking it out, its edges
pristine, he wiped

his face. The handkerchief came away dirtied with specks of rot. He
felt as empty as

the sac in the hall outside.

"You asked me once if I believed in Hell," he said. "Do you remember?"

"Yes."

"Is that what you think Mamoulia is? Something"-he wanted to

laugh-"something from Hell?"

"I've considered the possibility. Brut I'm not by nature a supernaturalist.

Heaven and Hell. All that paraphernalia. My system revolts at it."

"If not devils, what?"

"Is it so important?"

Marty wiped his sweaty palms on his trousers. He felt contaminated by this

obscurity. It would take a long time to wash the horror out, if he ever could. He'd

made the error of digging too deep, and the story he'd heard-that and the dog at the

door-were the consequence.

"You look sick," Whitehead said.

"I never thought . . ."

"What? That the dead can get up and walk? Oh, Marty, I took you for a

Christian, despite your protestations."

"I'm getting out," Marty said. "Both of us."

"Both?"

"Carys and me. We'll go away. From him. From you."

"Poor Marty. You're more bovine than I thought you were. You won't see her

again."

"Why not?"

"She's with him, damn you! Didn't it occur to you? She went with him!" So

that had been the unthinkable solution to her abrupt vanishing trick. "Willingly, of

course."

"No."

"Oh, yes, Marty. He had a claim on her from the beginning. He rocked her in

his arms when she was barely born. Who knows what kind of influence he has. I won

her back, of course, for a while." He sighed. "I made her love me."

"She wanted to be away from you."

"Never. She's my daughter, Strauss. She's as manipulative as I am. Anything

between you and her was purely a marriage of her convenience."

"You're a fucking bastard."

"That's a given, Marty. I'm a monster; I concede the point." He threw up his

hands, palms out, innocent of everything but guilt.

"I thought you said she loved you. Still she went."

"I told you: she's my daughter. She thinks the way I do. She went with him

to learn how to use her powers. I did the same, remember?"

This line of argument, even from vermin like Whitehead, made a kind of

sense. Beneath her strange conversation hadn't there always lurked a

contempt for

Marty and the old man alike, contempt earned by their inability to sum her up? Given

the opportunity, wouldn't Carys go dance with the Devil if she felt she'd understand

more of herself by doing so?

"Don't concern yourself with her," Whitehead said. "Forget her; she's gone."

Marty tried to hold on to the image of her face, but it was deteriorating.

He was suddenly very tired, exhausted to his bones.

"Get some rest, Marty. Tomorrow we can bury the whore together."

"I'm not getting involved in this."

"I told you once, didn't I, if you stayed with me, there was nowhere I

Page 341

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

couldn't take you. It's more true now than ever. You know Toy's dead."

"When? How?"

"I didn't ask the details. The point is, he's gone. There's only you and I now."

"You made a fool out of me."

Whitehead's face was a portrait of persuasion. "An error of taste," he said.

"Forgive me."

"Too late."

"I don't want you to leave me, Marty. I won't let you leave me! You hear?"

His finger jabbed the air. "You came here to help me! What have you done? Nothing!

Nothing!"

Blandishment had turned into accusations of betrayal in mere seconds. One

moment tears, the next curses, and behind it all, the same terror of being left

alone. Marty watched the old man's trembling hands fist and unfist.

"Please . . ." he appealed, ". . . don't leave me."

"I want you to finish the story."

"Good boy."

"Everything, you understand me. Everything."

"What more is there to tell?" Whitehead said. "I became rich. I had entered

one of the fastest-growing postwar markets: pharmaceuticals. Within half a decade I

was up there with the world leaders." He smiled to himself. "What's more, there was

very little illegality in the way I made my fortune. Unlike many, I played by the

rules."

"And Mamouljian? Did he help you?"

"He taught me not to agonize over the moral issues."

"And what did he want in return?"

Whitehead narrowed his eyes. "You're not so stupid, are you?" he said appreciatively. "You manage to get right to the hurt when it suits you."

"It's an obvious question. You'd made a deal with him."

"No!" Whitehead interrupted, face set. "I made no deal, not in the way you

mean it anyway. There was, perhaps, a gentleman's agreement, but that's long past.

He's had all he's getting from me."

"Which was?"

"To live through me," Whitehead replied.

"Explain," Marty said, "I don't understand."

"He wanted life, like any other man. He had appetites. And he satisfied them

through me. Don't ask me how. I don't understand myself. But sometimes I could feel

him at the back of my eyes . . ."

"And you let him?"

"At first I didn't even know what he was doing: I had other calls on my attention. I was getting richer by the hour, it seemed. I had houses, land, art,

women. It was easy to forget that he was always there, watching; living by proxy.

"Then in 1959 I married Evangeline. We had a wedding that would have shamed

royalty: it was written up in newspapers from here to Hong Kong.
Wealth and

Influence marries Intelligence and Beauty: it was the ideal match. It
crowned my

happiness, it really did."

"You were in love."

"It was impossible not to love Evangeline. I think"-he sounded
surprised as

he spoke-"I think she even loved me."

"What did she make of Mamoulia?"

"Ah, there's the rub," he said. "She loathed him from the start. She said
he

was too puritanical; that his presence made her feel perpetually guilty.
And she was

right. He loathed the body; its functions disgusted him. But he couldn't
be free of

it, or its appetites. That was a torment to him. And as time went by
that streak of

self-hatred worsened."

"Because of her?"

"I don't know. Perhaps. Now I think back, he probably wanted her, the
way

he'd wanted beauties in the past. And of course she despised him,
right from the

beginning. Once she was mistress of the house this war of nerves just
escalated.

Eventually she told me to get rid of him. This was just after Carys was

born. She

said she didn't like him handling the baby-which he seemed to like to do. She just

didn't want him in the house. I'd known him two decades by now-he'd lived in my

house, he'd shared my life-and I realized I knew nothing about him. He was still the

mythical card-player I'd met in Warsaw."

Page 342

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"Did you ever ask him?"

"Ask him what?"

"Who he was? Where he came from? How he got his skills?"

"Oh, yes, I asked him. On each occasion the answer was a little different

from the time before."

"So he was lying to you?"

"Quite blatantly. It was a sort of joke, I think: his idea of a party piece, never to be the same person twice. As if he didn't quite exist. As if this man

called Mamouljian was a construction, covering something else altogether."

"What?"

Whitehead shrugged. "I don't know. Evangeline used to say: he's empty. That

was what she found foul about him. It wasn't his presence in the house that

distressed her, it was his absence, the nullity of him. And I began to think maybe

I'd be better getting rid of him, for Evangeline's sake. All the lessons he had to

teach me I'd learned. I didn't need him anymore.

"Besides, he'd become a social embarrassment. God, when I think back I

wonder-I really wonder-how we let him rule us for so long. He'd sit at the dinner

table and you could feel the spell of depression he'd cast on the guests. And the

older he got the more his talk was all futility.

"Not that he visibly aged; he didn't. He doesn't look a year older now than

when I first met him."

"No change at all?"

"Not physically. There's something altered maybe. He's got an air of defeat

about him now."

"He didn't seem defeated to me."

"You should have seen him in his prime. He was terrifying then, believe me.

People would fall silent when he stepped through the door: he seemed to soak up the

joy in anyone; kill it on the spot. It got to the point where Evangeline couldn't

bear to be in the same room with him. She got paranoid about him plotting to kill

her and the child. She had somebody sit with Carys every night, to make certain that

he didn't touch her. Come to think of it, it was Evangeline who first coaxed me into

buying the dogs. She knew he had an abhorrence of them."

"But you didn't do as she asked? I mean, you didn't throw him out."

"Oh, I knew I'd have to act sooner or later; I just lacked the balls to do

it. Then he started petty power games, just to prove I still needed him. It was a

tactical error. The novelty value of an in-house puritan had worn very thin. I told

him so. Told him he'd have to change his whole demeanor or go. He refused, of

course. I knew he would. All I wanted was an excuse to break our association off,

and he gave it to me on a plate. Looking back, of course, I realize he knew damn

well what I was doing. Anyway, the upshot was-I threw him out. Well, not me

personally. Toy did the deed."

"Toy worked for you personally?"

"Oh, yes. Again, it was Evangeline's idea: she was always so protective of

me. She suggested I hire a bodyguard. I chose Toy. He'd been a boxer, and he was as

honest as the day's long. He was always unimpressed by Mamouljian. Never had the

least qualm about speaking his mind. So when I told him to get rid of the man, he

did just that. I came home one day and the card-player had gone.

"I breathed easy that day. It was as though I'd been wearing a stone around

my neck and not known it. Suddenly it was gone: I was lightheaded.

"Any fears I'd had about the consequences proved utterly groundless. My

fortune didn't evaporate. I was as successful as ever without him. More so, perhaps.

I found new confidence."

"And you didn't see him again?"

"Oh, no, I saw him. He came back to the house twice, each time unannounced.

Things hadn't gone well for him, it seemed. I don't know what it was, but he'd lost

the magic touch somehow. The first time he came back he was so

decrepit I scarcely

recognized him. He looked ill, he smelled foul. If you'd seen him in the street

you'd have crossed over the road to avoid him. I could scarcely credit the

transformation. He didn't want even to step into the house-not that I would have let

him-all he wanted was money, which I gave him, and then he went away."

"And it was genuine?"

"What do you mean, genuine?"

"The beggar performance: it was real, was it? I mean, it wasn't another story . . . ?"

Page 343

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

Whitehead raised his eyebrows. "All these years . . . I never thought of that. Always assumed . . ." He stopped, and began again on a different tack. "You

know, I'm not a sophisticated man, despite appearances to the contrary. I'm a thief.

My father was a thief, and probably his father too. All this culture I surround

myself with, it's a facade. Things I've picked up from other people. Received good

taste, if you like.

"But after a few years you begin to believe your own publicity; you

begin to

think you actually are a sophisticate, a man of the world. You start to be ashamed

of the instincts that got you where you are, because they're part of an embarrassing

history. That's what happened to me. I lost any sense of what I was."

"Well, I think it's time the thief had his say again: time I started to use

his eyes, his instinct. You taught me that, though Christ knows you weren't aware of

it."

Me?"

"We're the same. Don't you see? Both thieves. Both victims."

The self-pity in Whitehead's pronouncement was too much. "You can't tell me

you're a victim," Marty said, "the way you've lived."

"What do you know about my feelings?" Whitehead snapped back. "Don't

presume, you hear me? Don't think you understand, because you don't! He took

everything away from me; everything! First Evangeline, then Toy, now Carys. Don't

tell me whether I've suffered or not!"

"What do you mean, he took Evangeline? I thought she died in an accident?"

Whitehead shook his head. "There's a limit to what I can tell you," he said.

"Some things I can't express. Never will." The voice was ashen. Marty let the point

go, and moved on.

"You said he came back twice."

"That's right. He came again, a year or two after his first visit.

Evangeline wasn't at home that night. It was November. Toy answered the door, I

remember, and though I hadn't heard Mamouljian's voice I knew it was him. I went into

the hallway. He was standing on the step, in the porch light. It was drizzling. I

can see him now, the way his eyes found me. 'Am I welcome?' he said. Just stood

there and said, 'Am I welcome?'"

"I don't know why, but I let him in. He didn't look in bad shape. Maybe I

thought he'd come to apologize, I can't remember. Even then I would have been

friends with him, if he'd offered. Not on the old basis. As business acquaintances,

perhaps. I let my defenses down. We started talking about the past

together"-Whitehead chewed the memory over, trying to get a better taste of it-"and

then he started to tell me how lonely he was, how he needed my companionship. I told

him Warsaw was a long time gone. I was a married man, a pillar of the community, and

I had no intention of changing my ways. He started to get abusive:
accused me of

ingratitude. Said I'd cheated him. Broken the covenant between us. I
told him

there'd never been a covenant, I'd just won a game of cards once, in a
distant city,

and as a result, he'd chosen to help me, for his own reasons. I said I
felt I'd

acceded to his demands sufficiently to feel that any debt to him had
been paid. He'd

shared my house, my friends, my life for a decade: everything that I
had, had been

his to share. 'It's not enough,' he said, and he began again: the same
pleas as

before, the same demands that I give up this pretense to respectability
and go off

somewhere with him, be a wanderer, be his pupil, learn new, terrible
lessons about

the way of the world. And I have to say he made it sound almost
attractive. There

were times when I tired of the masquerade; when I smelled war, dirt;
when I saw the

clouds over Warsaw, and I was homesick for the thief I used to be. But
I wasn't

going to throw everything away for nostalgia's sake. I told him so. I
think he must

have known I was immovable, because he became desperate. He
started to ramble,

started to tell me he was frightened without me, lost. I was the one

he'd given

years of his life and his energies to, and how could I be so callous and unloving?

He laid hands on me, wept, tried to paw my face. I was horrified by the whole thing.

He disgusted me with his melodrama; I wanted no part of it, or him. But he wouldn't

leave. His demands turned into threats, and I suppose I lost my temper. No suppose

about it. I've never been so angry. I wanted an end to him and all he stood for: my

grubby past. I hit him. Not hard at first, but when he wouldn't stop staring at me I

lost control. He didn't make any attempt to defend himself, and his passivity only

inflamed me more. I hit him and hit him, and he just took it. Kept offering up his

face to be beaten-" He took a trembling breath. "-God knows I've done worse things.

But nothing I feel so ashamed of. I didn't stop till my knuckles began to split.

Page 344

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

Then I gave him to Toy, who really worked him over. And all the time not a peep out

of him. I go cold to think about it. I can still see him against the wall, with Bill

at his throat and his eyes not looking at where the next blow was

coming from but at

me. Just at me.

"I remember he said: `Do you know what you've done?' Just like that.
Very

quietly, blood coming out with the words.

"Then something happened. The air got thick. The blood on his face
started

to crawl around like it was alive. Toy let him go. He slid down the
wall; left a

smear down it. I thought we'd killed him. It was the worst moment of
my life,

standing here with Toy, both of us staring down at this bag of bones
we'd beaten up.

That was our mistake, of course. We should never have backed down.
We should have

finished it then and there, and killed him."

"Jesus."

"Yes! Stupid, not to have finished it. Bill was loyal: there would have
been

no comeback. But we didn't have the courage. I didn't have the
courage. I just made

Toy clean Mamoulia up, then drive him to the middle of the city and
dump him."

"You wouldn't have killed him," Marty said.

"Still you insist on reading my mind," Whitehead replied, wearily.
"Don't

you see that's what he wanted? What he'd come for? He would have

let me be his

executioner then, if I'd only had the nerve to follow through. He was sick of life.

I could have put him out of his misery, and that would have been the end of it."

"You think he's mortal?"

"Everything has its season. His is past. He knows it."

"So all you need do is wait, right? He'll die, given time." Marty was

suddenly sick of the story now; of thieves, of chance. The whole sorry tale, true or

untrue, repulsed him. "You don't need me anymore," he said. He stood and crossed to

the door. The sound of his feet in the glass was too loud in the small room.

"Where are you going?" the old man wanted to know.

"Away. As far as I can get."

"You promised to stay."

"I promised to listen. I have listened. And I don't want any of this bloody

place."

Marty began to open the door. Whitehead addressed his back.

"You think the European'll let you be? You've seen him in the flesh, you've

seen what he can do. He'll have to silence you sooner or later. Have you thought of

that?"

"I'll take the risk."

"You're safe here."

"Safe?" Marty repeated incredulously. "You can't be serious. Safe? You really are pathetic, you know that?"

"If you go-" Whitehead warned.

"What?" Marty turned on him, spitting contempt. "What will you do, old man?"

"I'll have them after you in two minutes flat; you're skipping parole."

"And if they find me, I'll tell them everything. About the heroin, about her

out there in the hall. Every dirty thing I can dig up to tell them. I don't give a

monkey's toss for your fucking threats, you hear?"

Whitehead nodded. "So. Stalemate."

"Looks like it," Marty replied, and stepped out into the corridor without

looking back.

There was a morbid surprise awaiting him: the pups had found Bella. They had

not been spared Mamoulia's resurrecting hand, though they could not have served any

practical purpose. Too small, too blind. They lay in the shadow of her empty belly,

their mouths seeking teats that had long since gone. One of them was missing, he

noted. Had it been the sixth child he'd seen move in the grave, either

buried too

deeply, or too profoundly degenerated, to follow where the rest went?

Bella raised her neck as he sidled past. What was left of her head swung in

his general direction. Marty looked away, disgusted; but a rhythmical thumping made

him glance back.

She had forgiven him his previous violence, apparently. Content now, with

her adoring litter in her lap, she stared, eyeless, at him, while her wretched tail

beat gently on the carpet.

In the room where Marty had left him Whitehead sat slumped with exhaustion.

Though it had been difficult to tell the story at first, it had become

Page 345

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

easier with the telling, and he was glad to have unburdened it. So many times he'd

wanted to tell Evangeline. But she had signaled, in her elegant, subtle way, that if

there were indeed secrets he had from her, she didn't want to know them. All those

years, living with Mamoulia in the home, she had never directly asked Whitehead

why, as though she'd known the answer would be no answer at all, merely another

question.

Thinking about her brought many sorrows to his throat; they brimmed in him.

The European had killed her, he had no doubt of that. He or his agents had been on

the road with her; her death had not been chance. Had it been chance he would have

known. His unfailing instinct would have sensed its rightness, however terrible his

grief. But there had been no such sense, only the recognition of his oblique

complicity in her death. She had been killed as revenge upon him. One of many such

acts, but easily the worst.

And had the European taken her, after death? Had he slipped into the mausoleum and touched her into life, the way he had the dogs? The thought was

repugnant, but Whitehead entertained it nevertheless, determined to think the worst

for fear that if he didn't Mamoulia might still find terrors to shake him with.

"You won't," he said aloud to the room of glass. Won't: frighten me, intimidate me, destroy me. There were ways and means. He could escape still, and

hide at the ends of the earth. Find a place where he could forget the story of his

life.

There was something he hadn't told; a fraction of the Tale, scarcely pivotal

but of more than passing interest, that he'd withheld from Strauss as he would

withhold it from any interrogator. Perhaps it was unspeakable. Or perhaps it touched

so centrally, so profoundly, upon the ambiguities that had pursued him through the

wastelands of his life that to speak it was to reveal the color of his soul.

He pondered this last secret now, and in a strange way the thought of it

warmed him:

He had left the game, that first and only game with the European, and

scrambled through the half-choked door into Muranowski Square. No stars were

burning; only the bonfire at his back.

As he'd stood in the gloom, reorienting himself, the chill creeping up

through the soles of his boots, the lipless woman had appeared in front of him.

She'd beckoned. He assumed she intended to lead him back the way he'd come, and so

followed. She'd had other intentions, however. She'd led him away from the square to

a house with barricaded windows, and-ever curious, he'd pursued her into it, certain

that tonight of all nights no harm could possibly come to him.

In the entrails of the house was a tiny room whose walls were draped with

pirated swaths of cloth, some rags, others dusty lengths of velvet that had once

framed majestic windows. Here, in this makeshift boudoir, there was one piece of

furniture only. A bed, upon which the dead Lieutenant Vasiliev-whom he had so

recently seen in Mamoulia's gaming room-was making love. And as the thief stepped

through the door, and the lipless woman stood aside, Konstantin had looked up from

his labors, his body continuing to press into the woman who lay beneath him on a

mattress strewn with Russian and German and Polish flags.

The thief stood, disbelieving, wanting to tell Vasiliev that he was

performing the act incorrectly, that he'd mistaken one hole for another, and it was

no natural orifice he was using so brutally, but a wound.

The lieutenant wouldn't have listened, of course. He grinned as he worked,

the red pole rooting and dislodging, rooting and dislodging. The corpse he was

pleasuring rocked beneath him, unimpressed by her paramour's attentions.

How long had the thief watched? The act showed no sign of consummation. At

last the lipless woman had murmured "Enough?" in his ear, and he

had turned a little

way to her while she had put her hand on the front of his trousers.
She seemed not

at all surprised that he was aroused, though in all the years since he
had never

understood how such a thing was possible. He had long ago accepted
that the dead

could be woken. But that he had felt heat in their presence-that was
another crime

altogether, more terrible to him than the first.

There is no Hell, the old man thought, putting the boudoir and its
charred

Casanova out of his mind. Or else Hell is a room and a bed and
appetite everlasting,

and I've been there and seen its rapture and, if the worst comes to the
worst, I

will endure it.

Page 346

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

Part Five

THE DELUGE

Out of a fired ship, which, by no way

But drowning could be rescued from the flame,

Some men leaped forth, and ever as they came

Near the foes' ships, did by their shot decay;

So all were lost, which in the ship were found,

They in the sea being burnt,

they in the burnt ship drowned.

-JOHN DONNE, "A Burnt Ship"

IX

Bad Faith

49

The Deluge descended in the driest July in living memory; but then no revisionist's

dream of Armageddon is complete without its paradox. Lightning appearing out of a

clear sky; flesh turned to salt; the meek inheriting the earth: all unlikely

phenomena.

That July, however, there were no spectacular transformations. No celestial

lights appeared in the clouds. No rains of salamanders or children. If angels came

and went that month-if the looked-for Deluge broke-then it was, like the truest

Armageddons, metaphor.

There are, it's true, some freakish occurrences to be recounted, but most of

them take place in backwaters, in ill-lit corridors, in shunned wastelands among

rain-sodden mattresses and the ashes of old bonfires. They are local;

almost

private. Their shock waves-at best-made gossip among wild dogs.

Most of these miracles, however-games, rains and salvations-were slipped

with such cunning behind the facade of ordinary life that only the sharpest-sighted,

or those in search of the unlikely, caught a glimpse of the Apocalypse showing its

splendors to a sun-bleached city.

50

The city didn't welcome Marty back with, open arms, but he was glad to be away from

the house once and for all, his back turned on the old man and his madness. Whatever

the consequences of his departure in the long term-and he would have to think very

carefully about whether he now turned himself in-he at least had a breathing space;

time to think things through.

The tourist season was under way. London was thronged with visitors, making

familiar streets unfamiliar. He spent the first couple of days just wandering

around, getting used to being footloose and fancy-free again. He had precious little

money left: but he could turn his hand to a laboring job if need be. With summer at

its height the building trade was hungry for fit workhorses. The thought of an

honest day's work, its production of sweat paid for in cash, was attractive. If

necessary he would sell the Citroën that he'd taken from the Sanctuary in one last,

and probably ill-advised, gesture of rebellion.

After two days of liberty, his thoughts turned to an old theme: America.

He'd had it tattooed on his arm as a keepsake of his prison dreams. Now, perhaps,

was the time for him to make it a reality. In his imagination, Kansas beckoned, its

grain fields running to the eye's limit in every direction, and not a man-made thing

in sight. He'd be safe there. Not just from the police and Mamoulia, but from

history, from stories told again and again, round in circles, world without end. In

Kansas, there would be a new story: a story that he could not know the end of. And

wasn't that a working definition of freedom, unspoiled by European hand, European

certainty?

To keep himself off the streets while he planned his escape he found a room

in Kilburn, a dingy one-room flat with a toilet two flights down, which was shared,

the landlord informed him, with six other people. In fact there were at least

fifteen occupants of the seven rooms in the house, including a family of four in

one. The bawling of the youngest child kept his sleep fitful, so he'd rise early and

leave the house to its own devices all day, only returning when the pubs were

closed, and then only grudgingly. Still, he reassured himself, it wasn't for long.

There were problems about the departure, of course, not the least of which

Page 347

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

was getting a passport with a visa stamp in it. Without it he would not be allowed

to step onto American soil. Securing himself these documents would have to be a

speedy operation. For all he knew his parole-jumping had been reported by Whitehead

and damn what tales Marty told. Perhaps the authorities were already combing the

streets for him.

On the third day of July, a week and a half after leaving the estate, he

decided to take fate by the horns and visit Toy's place. Despite Whitehead's

insistence that Bill was dead, Marty kept hope intact. Papa had lied before, many

times: why not in this instance?

The house was in an elegant backwater in Pimlico; a road of hushed facades

and expensive automobiles straddling the narrow pavements. He rang the doorbell half

a dozen times, but there was no sign of life. The venetian blinds were drawn on the

downstairs windows; there was a fat wedge of mail-circulars mostly-thrust in the

mailbox.

He was standing on the step staring dumbly at the door, knowing full well it

wasn't going to open, when a woman appeared on the next-door step. Not the owner of

the house, he was sure: more likely a cleaner. Her tanned face-who wasn't tanned

this blistering summer?-bore the suppressed delight of a bad-news bringer.

"Excuse me. Can I help you?" she inquired hopefully.

He was suddenly glad he'd dressed in jacket and tie to come to the house;

this woman looked the kind who'd report her slightest suspicions to the police.

"I was looking for Bill. Mr. Toy."

She clearly disapproved; if not of him, of Toy.

"He's not here," she said.

"Do you happen to know where he's gone?"

"Nobody knows. He just left her. He just upped and left."

"Left who?"

"His wife. Well . . . lady friend. She was found in there a couple of weeks

ago, didn't you read about it? It was all over the papers. They interviewed me. I

told them; I said he wasn't a pretty piece of work: not at all."

"I must have missed it."

"It was all over the papers. They're looking for him at the moment."

"Mr. Toy?"

"Murder Squad."

"Really."

"You're not a reporter?"

"No."

"Only I'm willing, you know, to tell my story, if the price is right. The things I could tell you."

"Really."

"She was in a terrible state, apparently . . ."

"What do you mean?"

Mindful of her salability, the matron had no intention of divulging the details, even if she knew them, which Marty doubted. But she was willing to offer a

tantalizing trailer. "There was mutilation," she promised, "unrecognizable, even to

her nearest and dearest."

"Are you sure?"

The woman looked affronted by this smear on her authenticity.

"She either did it to herself, or else somebody did it to her and kept her

in there, locked up, bleeding to death. For days and days. The smell when they

opened the door-"

The sound of the slushy, lost voice that had answered the telephone came

back to Marty, and he knew without doubt that Toy's lady had already been dead when

she spoke. Mutilated and dead, but resurrected as a telephonist to keep up

appearances for a useful while. The syllables ran in his ear: "Who is this?" she'd

asked, hadn't she? Despite the heat and light of a brilliant July, he started to

shiver. Mamouljian had been here. He'd crossed this very threshold in search of Toy.

He had a score to settle with Bill, as Marty now knew; what might a man not plan,

while the humiliations festered, in return for such violence?

Marty caught the woman staring at him.

"Are you all right?" she said.

"Thank you. Yes."

"You need some sleep. I have the same problems. Hot nights like these: I get

restless."

Page 348

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

He thanked her again and hurried away from the house, without looking back.

Too easy to imagine the horrors; they came without warning, out of nowhere.

Nor would they go away. Not now. The memory of Mamouljian was with him-night

and day and restless night-from then on. He became aware (was it just his dream

life, denied its span in sleepless nights, spreading into wakefulness?) of another

world, hovering beyond or behind the facade of reality.

There was no time for prevarication. He had to leave; forget Whitehead and

Carys and the law. Trick his way out of the country and into America any way he

could; away to a place where real was real, and dreams stayed under the eyelids,

where they belonged.

51

Raglan was an expert at the fine art of forgery. Two telephone calls located him,

and Marty struck a deal with the man. The appropriate visa could be

forged in a

passport for a modest fee. If Marty could bring along a photograph of himself the

job could be done in a day; two at the most.

It was the fifteenth of July: the month was simmering, a few degrees off the

boil. The radio, blaring from the room next door, had promised a day as faultlessly

blue as the one preceding, and the one preceding that. Not even blue; white. The sky

was blind white these days.

Marty set out for Raglan's house early, partially to avoid the worst of the

heat, and partially because he was eager to get the forgery made, buy his ticket,

and be away. As it was, he got no further than Kilburn High Road Tube Station. It

was there, on the cover of the Daily Telegraph that he read the headline:

MILLIONAIRE RECLUSE FOUND DEAD AT HOME. Beneath it, a picture of Papa; a younger,

beardless Whitehead, snapped at the height of his looks and influence. He bought the

paper, and two others that carried the story on their covers, and read them standing

in the middle of the pavement, while harried commuters nudged and tutted at him as

they surged down the stairs into the station.

"The death was announced today of Joseph Newzam Whitehead, the millionaire

head of the Whitehead Corporation, whose pharmaceutical products had, until recent

falls, made it one of the most successful companies in Western Europe. Mr.

Whitehead, sixty-eight, was found at his hideaway sanctum in Oxfordshire in the

early hours of yesterday morning by his chauffeur. He is believed to have died of

heart failure. Police say there are no suspicious circumstances. For Obituary; see

page seven."

The obituary was the usual amalgam of information gleaned from the pages of

Who's Who, with a brief outline of the fortunes of the Whitehead Corporation, plus a

spicing of conjecture, mostly concerning the corporation's recent fall from

financial grace. There was a potted history of Whitehead's life, though the early

years were skimpily reported, as though there was some doubt as to the details. The

rest of the design was there, albeit threadbare. The marriage to Evangeline; the

spectacular rise in the boom years of the late fifties; the decades of consolidation

and achievement; then the withdrawal, after Evangeline's death, into mysterious and

unilluminating silence.

He was dead.

Despite all the brave talk, all the defiance, all the contempt for the machinations of the European, the battle was lost. Whether it was indeed a natural

death, as the papers reported, or Mamoulian's doing, Marty could not know. But there

was no denying the curiosity he felt. More than curiosity, grief. That he had a

capacity for sorrow at the old man's death came as a shock; perhaps more of a shock

than the sorrow itself. He hadn't counted on the ache of loss he felt.

He canceled the meeting with Raglan and went back to the flat, there to

study the newspapers-over and over again, squeezing out every drop from the text

about the circumstances of Whitehead's death. There were few clues, of course: all

the reports were couched in the bland and formal language of such announcements.

Having exhausted the written word he went next door and asked to borrow his

neighbor's radio. The young woman who occupied the room, a student, he thought, took

some persuading, but she eventually relinquished it. He listened to the half-hourly

bulletins from midmorning on, while the heat rose in his room. The story had some

prominence until noon, but thereafter events in Beirut and a drugs
coup in

Southampton claimed the bulk of the time, the report of Whitehead's
death steadily

slipping from a major story to news-in-brief, and thence, by mid-
afternoon, into

invisibility.

Page 349

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

He returned the radio, declining a cup of coffee with the girl and her
cat,

the smell of whose uneaten food hung around the narrow room like
the threat of

thunder, and returned to his own quarters to sit and think. If
Mamoulia had indeed

murdered Whitehead-and he didn't doubt that the European had the
skill to do it

undetected by the acutest pathologist-it was indirectly his fault.
Perhaps, had he

remained at the house, the old man would still be alive. It was
unlikely. Far more

likely, he too would be dead. But the guilt still nagged.

For the next couple of days he did very little: entropy had poured lead
into

his bowels. His thoughts were circular, almost obsessional. In the
private cinema of

his skull he ran the home movies he'd accrued; from those first,
uncertain glimpses

of the private life of power to his later memories-almost too sharp, too detailed-of

the man alone in a glassfloored cage; the dogs; the dark. Through most, though not

all, the face of Carys appeared, sometimes quizzical, sometimes careless: often

sealed from him, peering up between the bars of her downcast lashes as if envying

him. Late at night, when the baby had fallen asleep in the flat below, and the only

sound was the traffic on the High Road, he'd rerun those most private moments

between them, moments too precious to be conjured up indiscriminately for fear their

power to revive him wane with repetition.

For a time he had tried to forget her: it was more convenient that way. Now

he clung to thoughts of that face, bereft. He wondered if he would see her again.

The Sunday newspapers all carried further reports on the death. The Sunday

Times gave over the front of its Review section to a thumbnail sketch Of BRITAIN'S

MOST MYSTERIOUS MILLIONAIRE, written by Lawrence Dwoskin, "longtime associate and

confidant of England's Howard Hughes. " Marty read the piece through twice, unable

to scan the printed words without hearing Dwoskin's insinuating tone in his ear . .

. he was in many ways a paragon, " it read, ". - . though the almost hermitlike

history of his latter years gave rise, inevitably, to reams of gossip and tittle-tattle, much of it hurtful to a man of Joseph's sensibilities. Through all

his years in public life, exposed to the scrutiny of a press that was not always

beneficent, he never hardened himself to criticism, implied or explicit. To we few

who knew him well he revealed a nature more susceptible to barbs than his outward

show of indifference would ever have suggested. When he found rumors of misconduct

or excess being circulated about him, the criticism bit deeply, especially as, since

his beloved wife Evangeline's death in 1965, he had become the most fastidious of

sexual and moral beings. "

Marty read this simpering cant with a bitter taste in his throat. The canonization of the old man had already begun. Soon, presumably, would come the

biographies, authorized-and then bowdlerized-by his estate, turning his life into a

series of flattering fables by which he would be remembered. The process nauseated

him. Reading the platitudes in Dwoskin's text he found himself fiercely and

unpredictably defensive of the old man's foibles, as though everything

that had made

him unique-made him real-now stood in danger of being whitewashed away.

He read Dwoskin's article to its maudlin end and put it down. The only

detail in its length that was of interest was mention of the funeral service, which

was to be held in a small church at Minster Lovell the following day. The body was

then to be cremated. Dangerous though it might be, Marty felt the need to go and pay

his last respects.

52

In fact the service attracted so many onlookers, from casual observers to diehard

scandal-sniffers, Marty's presence went entirely unnoticed. The whole event had an

unreal air to it, as if contrived to have the entire world know that the great man

was dead. There were correspondents and photographers from all over Europe in

addition to the clan from Fleet Street; and among the mourners some of the most

famous faces in public life: politicians, professional pundits, captains of

industry; even a smattering of movie stars whose only claim to fame was fame itself.

The presence of so many celebrities attracted dedicated Peeping Toms

in their

hundreds. The small church, the yard around it, and the road around that were

overrun. The service itself was relayed to those outside the building via

loudspeakers; a curious, dislocating detail. The voice of the presiding clergyman

sounded tinny and theatrical through the sound system, his eulogy punctuated by an

amplified percussion of coughs and shufflings.

Marty didn't like hearing the service this way, any more than he liked the

tourists, ill-dressed for a funeral, who lolled on the gravestones and littered the

Page 350

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

grass, waiting with barely suppressed impatience for this tiresome interruption in

their stargazing to be concluded. Whitehead had encouraged a dormant misanthropy in

Marty: it now had a permanent place in his worldview. Looking around the graveyard

at this heat-flushed, dull-eyed congregation he felt contempt well up in him. He

itched to turn his back on the farrago and slip away. But the desire to see this

final scene played out overwhelmed the desire to leave, so he waited in the throng

while wasps buzzed at children's sticky heads and a woman with the physique of a

stick insect flirted with him from the top of a tomb.

Somebody was now reading the lesson. An actor, to judge by the

self-regarding tone. It was announced as a passage from the Psalms, but Marty didn't

recognize it.

As the reading was drawing to a close, a car drew up at the main gate. Heads

turned and cameras clicked as two figures emerged. A buzz spread through the crowd;

people who'd taken to lying down stood up again to see what could be seen. Something

roused Marty from his lethargy, and he too stood on tiptoe to glimpse the

latecomers: it was quite an entrance they were making. He peered between the heads

of the crowd to catch a look; caught sight, then lost it again; said "no," quietly

to himself, not believing; then pushed his way through the crowd trying to keep pace

as Mamouljian, a veiled Carys at his side, glided down the pathway from gate to porch

and disappeared into the church. "Who was it?" somebody asked him. "Do you know who

it was?"

Hell, he wanted to answer. The Devil himself.

Mamouliau was here! In broad daylight, sun on the back of his neck, walking

with Carys arm in arm like man and wife, letting the cameras catch him for

tomorrow's edition. He had no fear, apparently. This late appearance, so measured,

so ironic, was a final gesture of contempt. And why did she play his game? Why

didn't she throw off his hand and denounce him for the unnatural thing he was?

Because she'd gone willingly into his entourage, the very way Whitehead had told him

she would. In search of what? Someone to celebrate that strain of nihilism in her;

to educate her in the fine art of dying? And what might she give in return? Ah,

there was the prickly question.

At long last the service came to an end. Suddenly, to the delight and

outrage of the congregation, a raucous saxophone broke the solemnity, and a jazz

rendering of "Fools Rush In" was blaring over the loudspeakers. Whitehead's final

joke, presumably. It earned its laughs; some of the crowd even applauded. From

inside the church there came the clatter of people rising from their pews. Marty

craned to get a better view of the porch, and failing, threaded his way back through

the press of people to a tomb that offered a view. There were birds in the

heat-drooped trees, and their pursuits distracted him, catching him up in their

swooping play. When he looked back the coffin was almost parallel with him,

shouldered, among others, by Ottaway and Curtsinger. The plain box seemed almost

indecently exposed. He wondered what they'd dressed the old man in at the last; if

they'd trimmed his beard and sewed his eyelids shut.

The procession of mourners followed on the heels of the pallbearers, a black

cortege that parted the candy-colored sea of tourists. To right and left the

shutters tutted; some damn fool called, "Watch the birdy." The jazz played on. It

was all gratifyingly absurd. The old man, Marty guessed, would be smiling in his

box.

Finally Carys and Mamouliau emerged from the shade of the porch into the

brilliance of the afternoon, and Marty was sure he caught the girl cautiously

scanning the crowd, fearful that her companion would notice. She was looking for

him; he was certain of it. She knew he'd be there, somewhere, and she was looking

for him. His mind raced, tripping over itself in its turmoil. If he made a sign to

her, however subtle, there was every chance Mamoulian would see it, and that was

surely dangerous for them both. Better to hide his head then, painful as it was not

to lock glances with her.

Reluctantly, he stepped down off the tomb as the clump of mourners came

abreast of him, and spied what he could from the shelter of the crowd. The European

scarcely raised his head from its bowed position, and from what Marty could glimpse

between the bobbing heads Carys had given up her search-perhaps despairing of his

being there. As the coffin and its black tail wound out of the churchyard, Marty

ducked away and over the wall to watch events precede from a better vantage point.

In the road Mamoulian was speaking to one or two of the mourners. Handshakes

were exchanged; commiserations offered to Carys. Marty watched impatiently. Perhaps

Page 351

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

she and the European would separate in the throng, and he'd get a chance to show

himself, if only momentarily, and reassure her of his presence. But no

such

opportunity presented itself. Mamouliau was the perfect guardian, keeping Carys

close to him every moment. Pleasantries and farewells exchanged, they got into the

back of a dark green Rover and drove away. Marty raced to the Citroën. He mustn't

lose her now, whatever happened: this was perhaps his last chance to locate her. The

pursuit proved difficult. Once off the small country roads and onto the highway the

Rover accelerated with insolent ease. Marty gave chase as discreetly as the twin

imperatives of tactics and excitement would allow.

In the back seat of the car Carys had a strange, flickering thought.

Whenever she closed her lids to blink or shut out the day's glare, a figure

appeared: a runner. She recognized him in seconds: the gray track suit, a cloud of

steam emerging from the hood, named him before she glimpsed his face. She wanted to

glance over her shoulder, to see if he was, as she guessed, behind them somewhere.

But she knew better. Mamouliau would guess something was going on, if he hadn't

already.

The European looked across at her. She was a secret one, he thought. He

never really knew what she was thinking. She was, in that regard, her mother's

child. Whereas he had learned, with time, to read Joseph's face, Evangeline had

seldom let a glimmer of her true feelings show. For the space of several months he'd

assumed her to be indifferent to his presence in the house; only time had told the

true story of her machinations against him. He sometimes suspected Carys of similar

pretenses. Wasn't she simply too compliant? Even now she wore the faintest trace of

a smile.

"It amused you?" he inquired.

"What?"

"The funeral."

"No," she said lightly. "No, of course not."

"You were smiling."

The trace evaporated; her face slackened. "It had some grotesquerie value, I

suppose," she said, her voice dull, "watching them all play up to the cameras."

"You didn't trust their grief?"

"They never loved him."

"And you did?"

She seemed to weigh the question up. "Love . . ." she said, floating the

word on the hot air to see, it seemed, what it would become. "Yes. I suppose I did."

She made Mamouliau uneasy. He wanted a better grip on the girl's mind, but

it refused his best endeavors. Fear of the illusions he might evoke for her had

certainly given her a veneer of obsequiousness, but he doubted they'd truly made a

slave of her. Terrors were a useful goad, but the law of diminishing returns

pertained; each time she fought him he was obliged to find some new, more awesome

fright: it exhausted him.

And now, to add insult to injury, Joseph was dead. He had perished-according

to the talk at the funeral-"peacefully in his sleep." Not even died; that vulgarity

had been exorcised from the vocabulary of all concerned. He had passed on, or over,

or away; he had gone to sleep. But never died. The cant and sentimentality that

followed the thief to the grave disgusted the European. But he disgusted himself

more. He had let Whitehead go. Not once, but twice, undone by his own desire to have

the game concluded with due attention to detail. That, and his concern to persuade

the thief to come willingly into the void. Prevarication had proved his undoing.

While he had threatened, and juggled visions, the old goat had slipped away.

That might not have been the end of the story. After all, he possessed the

facility to follow Whitehead into death, and bring him out of it, had he been able

to get to the corpse. But the old man had been wise to such an eventuality. His body

had been kept from viewing, even by his closest companions. It had been locked in a

bank safe (how appropriate!) and guarded night and day, much to the delight of the

tabloids, who reveled in such eccentricities. By this evening it would be ash; and

Mamouliau's last opportunity for permanent reunion would have been lost.

And yet . . .

Why did he feel as if the games they'd played all these years-the Temptation

games, the Revelation games, the Rejection, Vilification and Damnation games-were

not quite over? His intuition, like his strength, was dwindling: but he was certain

that something was amiss. He thought of the way the woman at his side smiled; the

secret on her face.

"Is he dead?" he suddenly asked her.

The question appeared to flummox her. "Of course he's dead," she replied.

"Is he, Carys?"

"We just saw his funeral, for God's sake."

She felt his mind, a solid presence, at the back of her neck. They had

played this scene many times in the preceding weeks-the trial of strength between

wills-and she knew that he was weaker by the day. Not so weak as to be negligible,

however: he could still deliver terrors, if it suited him.

"Tell me your thoughts . ." he said, so I don't have to dig for them."

If she didn't answer his questions, and he entered her forcibly, he'd see the runner for certain.

"Please," she said, making a sham of cowardice, "don't hurt me."

The mind withdrew a little.

"Is he dead?" Mamoulia inquired again.

"The night he died . . ." she began. What could she tell but the truth' No

lie would suffice: he would know. ". . . The night they said he died felt nothing.

There was no change. Not like when Mama died."

She threw a cowed look at Mamoulia, to reinforce the illusion of servility.

"What do you construe from that?" he asked.

"I don't know," she replied quite honestly.

"What do you guess?"

Again, honestly: "That he isn't dead."

The first smile Carys had ever seen on the European's face appeared. It was

merest hint, but it was there. She felt him withdraw the horns of his thought and

content himself with musing. He would not press her further. Too many plans to plan.

"Oh, Pilgrim," he said under his breath, chiding his invisible enemy like a

much-loved but errant child, "you almost had me fooled."

Marty followed the car off the highway and across the city to the house on Caliban

Street. It was early evening by the time the pursuit ended. Parked at a prudent

distance he watched them get out of the car. The European paid the driver and then,

after some delay unlocking the front door, he and Carys stepped into a house whose

dirtied lace curtains and peeling paintwork suggested nothing abnormal in a street

whose houses were all in need of renovation. Alight went on at the middle floor: a

blind was drawn.

He sat in the car for an hour, keeping the house in view, though nothing

happened. She did not appear at the window; no letters were thrown, wrapped in

stones and kisses, out to her waiting hero. But he hadn't really expected such

signs; they were fictional devices, and this was real. Dirty stone, dirty windows,

dirty terrors skulking at his groin.

He hadn't eaten properly since the announcement of Whitehead's death; now

for the first time since that morning, he felt healthily hungry. Leaving the house

to creeping twilight, he went to find himself sustenance.

53

Luther was packing. The days since Whitehead's death had been a whirlwind, and he

was dizzied by it. With so much money in his pocket, every minute a new option

occurred to him, a fantasy now realizable. For the short term at least he'd decided

to go home to Jamaica for a long holiday. He had left when he was eight, nineteen

years ago; his memories of the island were gilded. He was prepared to be

disappointed, but if he didn't like the place, no matter. A man of his newfound

wealth needed no specific plans: he could move on. Another island; another

continent.

He had almost finished his preparations for departure when a voice called

him from downstairs. It wasn't a voice he knew.

"Luther? Are you there?"

He went to the top of the stairs. The woman he'd once shared this small

house with had gone, left him six months ago taking their children. The house should

have been empty. But there was somebody in the hall; not one but two people. His

interlocutor, a tall, even stately man, stared up the stairs at him, light from the

landing shining on his wide, smooth brow. Luther recognized the face; from the

funeral perhaps? Behind him, in shadow, was a heavier figure.

"I'd like a word," said the first.

"How did you get in here? Who the hell are you?"

Page 353

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"Just a word. About your employer."

"Are you from the press, is that it? Look, I've told you everything I know.

Now get the hell out of here before I call the police. You've got no right breaking

in here."

The second man stepped out of the shadows and looked up the stairs.

His face

was made-up, that much was apparent even from a distance. The flesh was powdered,

the cheeks rouged: he looked like a pantomime dame. Luther stepped back from the top

of the stairs, mind racing. "Don't be afraid," the first man said, and the way he

said it made Luther more afraid than ever. What capacities might such politeness

harbor?

"If you're not out of here in ten seconds-" he warned.

"Where is Joseph?" the polite man asked.

"Dead."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure. I saw you at the funeral, didn't I? I don't know who

you are-"

"My name is Mamoulian."

"Well, you were there, weren't you? You saw for yourself. He's dead."

"I saw a box."

"He's dead, man," Luther insisted.

"You were the one who found him, I gather," the European said, moving a few

silent paces across the hallway to the bottom of the stairs.

"That's right. In bed," Luther replied. Maybe they were press, after all.

"I

found him in bed. He died in his sleep."

"Come down here. Furnish the details, if you would."

"I'm fine where I am."

The European looked up at the chauffeur's frowning face; felt, tentatively,

at the nape of his neck. There was too much heat and dirt in there; he wasn't

resilient enough for an investigation. There were other, cruder methods, however. He

half-gestured toward the Razor-Eater, whose sandalwood presence he smelled close.

"This is Anthony Breer," he said. "He has in his time dispatched children

and dogs-you remember the dogs, Luther?-with admirable thoroughness. He is not

afraid of death. Indeed he enjoys an extraordinary empathy with it."

The pantomime face gleamed up from the stairwell, desire in its eyes.

"Now, please," Mamouljian said, "for both our sakes; the truth."

Luther's throat was so dry the words scarcely came. "The old man's dead," he

said. "That's all I know. If I knew any more I'd tell you."

Mamouljian nodded; the look on his face as he spoke was compassionate, as if

he genuinely feared for what must happen next.

"You tell me something I want to believe; and you say it with such

conviction I almost do. In principle I can leave, content, and you can go about your

business. Except"-he sighed, heavily-"except that I don't quite believe you enough."

"Look, this is my fucking house!" Luther blustered, sensing that extreme

measures were needed now. The man called Breer had unbuttoned his jacket. He wore no

shirt underneath. There were skewers threaded through the fat of his chest,

transfixing his nipples, crossways. He reached up and drew two out; no blood came.

Armed with these steel needles, he shuffled to the bottom of the stairs.

"I've done nothing," Luther pleaded.

"So you say."

The Razor-Eater began to mount the stairs. The unpowdered breasts were

hairless and yellowish.

"Wait!"

At Luther's shout, Breer paused.

"Yes?" said Mamoulia.

"You keep him off me!"

"If you have something to tell me, spit it out. I'm more than eager to listen."

Luther nodded. Breer's face registered disappointment. Luther swallowed hard

before speaking. He'd been paid what was to him a small fortune not to say what he

was about to say, but Whitehead hadn't warned him that it would be like this. He'd

expected a gaggle of inquisitive reporters, perhaps even a lucrative offer for his

story to go into the Sunday papers, but not this: not this ogre, with his doll's

face and his bloodless wounds. There was a limit to the amount of silence any money

could buy, for Christ's sake.

Page 354

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"What have you got to say?" Mamouljian asked.

"He's not dead," Luther replied. There: it wasn't so difficult to do, was it? "It was all set up. Only two or three people knew: I was one of them."

"Why you?"

Luther wasn't certain on this point. "I suppose he trusted me," he said, shrugging.

"Ah."

"Besides, somebody had to find the body, and I was the most believable

candidate. He just wanted to make a clean getaway. Start again where he'd never be

found."

"And where was that?"

Luther shook his head. "I don't know, man. Anywhere, I suppose, where nobody

knows his face. He never told me."

"He must have hinted."

"No."

Breer took heart at Luther's reticence; his look brightened.

"Now come on," Mamouljian coaxed. "You've given me the motherlode; where's

the harm in telling me the rest?"

"There is no more."

"Why make pain for yourself?"

"He never told me, man!" Breer took a step up the stairs; and another; and

another.

"He must have given you some idea," Mamouljian said. "Think! Think! You said

he trusted you."

"Not that much! Hey, keep him off me, will you?"

The skewers glittered.

"For Christ's sake keep him off me!"

There were many pities. The first was that one human being was capable of such

smiling brutality to another. The second that Luther had known nothing. His fund of

information had been, as he'd claimed, strictly limited. But by the time the

European was certain of Luther's ignorance the man was past recall. Well; that

wasn't strictly true. Resurrection was perfectly plausible. But Mamouliau had better

things to do with his waning stamina; and besides, letting the man remain dead was

the one way he could compensate for the suffering the chauffeur had vainly endured.

"Joseph. Joseph. Joseph," Mamouliau chided. And the dark flowed on.

X

Nothing; and After

54

Having secured himself all he needed for a long vigil at the house on Caliban

Street-reading material, food, drink-Marty returned there and watched through most

of the night, with a bottle of Chivas Regal and the car radio for company. Just

before dawn he deserted his watch and drove drunkenly back to his room, sleeping

through until almost noon. When he woke his head felt the size of a balloon, and as

stalely inflated; but there was purpose in the day ahead. No dreams of Kansas now;

just the fact of the house and Carys locked up in it.

After a breakfast of hamburgers he returned to the street, parking far

enough away to be inconspicuous, yet close enough to see the comings
and goings. He

spent the next three days-in which the temperature rose from the high
seventies into

the middle eighties-in the same location. Sometimes he'd catch a few
minutes of

cramped sleep in the car; more often he returned to Kilburn to snatch
an hour or

two. The furnace of the street became familiar to him in all its moods.
He saw it

just before dawn, flickering into solidity. He saw it in midmorning,
young wives out

with children, business in their walk; in the gaudy afternoon too; and
in the

evening, when the sugar-pink light of a declining sun made brick and
slate exult.

The private and public lives of the Calibanese unfolded to him. A
spastic child at

Number Sixty-seven, whose anger was a secret vice. The woman at
Number Eighty-one

who welcomed a man to the house daily at twelve-forty-five. Her
husband, a policeman

to judge by shirt and tie, was welcomed home each night with a ration
of doorstep

ardor in direct proportion to the time wife and lover had spent
together at

lunchtime. More too: a dozen, two dozen stories, interlocking,
dividing again.

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

As to the house itself, he saw occasional activity there, but not once did

he glimpse Carys. The blinds at the middle windows were kept drawn throughout the

day and only lifted in the late afternoon, when the strongest of the sun was past.

The single top-story window looked to be permanently shuttered from inside.

Marty concluded that there were only two people in the house besides Carys.

One, of course, was the European. The other was the butcher that they'd almost faced

back at the Sanctuary; the dog-killer. He came and went once, sometimes twice,

daily; usually about some trivial business. An unpalatable sight, with his

cosmeticized features, his hobbled walk, the sly looks he gave the children as they

played.

In those three days Mamouljian didn't leave the house; at least Marty didn't

see him leave. He might appear fleetingly at the downstairs window, glancing out

down the sunlit street; but that, infrequently. And as long as he was in the house

Marty knew better than to attempt a rescue. No amount of courage-

and he did not

possess that attribute in limitless supply-would arm him against the powers the

European wielded. No; he must sit it out and wait for a safer opportunity to present

itself.

On the fifth day of his surveillance, with the heat still rising, luck came

his way. About eight-fifty in the evening, as dusk invaded the street, a taxi drew

up outside the house, and Mamoulia, dressed for the casino, got into it. Almost an

hour later the other man appeared at the front door, his face a blur in the

deepening night, but hungry somehow. Marty watched him lock the door, then glance up

and down the pavement before setting off. He waited until the shambling figure

disappeared around the corner of Caliban Street before he got out of the car.

Determined not to risk the least error in this-his first, and probably only, chance

at rescue-he went to the corner to check that the butcher was not simply taking a

late-evening constitutional. But the man's bulk was unmistakable as he headed toward

the city, hugging the shadows as he went. Only when he was completely out of sight

did Marty go back to the house.

All the windows were locked, back and front; there were no visible lights.

Perhaps-the doubt niggled-she was not even in the house; perhaps she'd gone out

while he was dozing in the car. He prayed not; and praying, forced open the back

door with a jimmy he'd bought for that very purpose. That and a flashlight: the

standbys of any self-respecting burglar.

Inside, the atmosphere was sterile. He began a room-by-room search of the

ground floor, determined to be as systematic as possible. This was no time for

unprofessional behavior: no shouting, no rushing about; just a cautious, efficient

investigation. The rooms were all empty, of people and of furniture. A few items,

discarded by the previous occupants of the house, emphasized rather than alleviated

the sense of desolation. He ascended a flight.

On the second floor he found Breer's room. It stank; an unwholesome mingling

of perfume and rancid meat. In the corner a large-screened black-and-white

television had been left on, its sound turned down to a sibilant whisper; some sort

of quiz show was playing. The quizmaster howled soundlessly in mock

despair at a

contestant's defeat. The fluttering, metallic light fell on the few articles of

furniture in the room: a bed with a bare mattress and several stained cushions; a

mirror propped on a chair, the seat of which was littered with cosmetics and toilet

waters. On the walls were photographs torn from a book of war atrocities. He did no

more than glimpse at them, but their details, even in the doubtful light, were

appalling. He closed the door on the squalor and tried the next. It was the toilet.

Beside that, the bathroom. The fourth and last door on this floor was tucked around

a half-corridor, and it was locked. He turned the handle once, twice, back and

forth, and then pressed his ear to the wood, listening for some clue from within.

"Carys?"

There was no reply: no sound of occupancy either.

"Carys? It's Marty. Can you hear me?" He rattled the handle again, more

fiercely. "It's Marty."

Impatience overtook him. She was there, just beyond the door-he was suddenly

seized by the absolute conviction of her presence. He kicked the door, more out of

frustration than anything; then, raising his heel to the lock, he booted it with all

his strength. The wood began to splinter beneath his assault. Half a dozen further

blows and the lock cracked; he put his shoulder to the door and forced it open.

The room smelled of her; was hot with her. Other than her presence and her

heat, however, it was practically empty. Just a bucket in the corner, and a

Page 356

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

selection of empty dishes; a scattering of books, a blanket, a small table on which

lay her gear: needles, hypodermic, dishes, matches. She was lying, curled up on

herself, in a corner of the room. A lamp, with a low-voltage bulb in it, stood in

another corner, its shade partially draped with a cloth to keep the light level

lower yet. She was wearing only a T-shirt and a pair of panties. Other articles of

clothing, jeans, sweaters, shirts, lay strewn around. When she looked up at him he

could see how the sweat on her brow made her hair cling.

"Carys."

At first she didn't seem to recognize him.

"It's me. It's Marty."

A tick of a frown creased her shiny forehead. "Marty?" she said, her voice

in miniature. The frown deepened: he wasn't sure she even saw him; her eyes swam.

"Marty," she repeated, and this time the name seemed to mean something to her.

"Yes, it's me."

He crossed the room to her, and she seemed almost shocked by the suddenness

of his approach. Her eyes sprang open, recognition flooding into them, with fear in

attendance. She half-sat up, the T-shirt clinging to her sweaty torso. The crook of

her arm was punctured and bruised.

"Don't come near me."

"What's wrong?"

"Don't come near me."

He took a step back at the ferocity of her order. What the hell had they

done to her?

She sat up fully, and put her head between her legs, elbows on her knees.

"Wait . . ." she said, still whispering.

Her breath became very regular. He waited, aware for the first time that the

room seemed to buzz. Perhaps not just the room: perhaps this whine-as if a generator

were humming away to itself somewhere in the building-had been in the air since he'd

first come in. If so, he hadn't noticed it. Now, waiting for her to finish whatever

ritual she was engaged upon, it irritated him. Subtle, yet so pervasive it was

impossible, after a few seconds of hearing it, to know if it were more than a whine

in the inner ear. He swallowed hard: his sinuses clicked. The sound went on, a

monotone. At last, Carys looked up.

"It's all right," she said. "He isn't here."

"I could have told you that. He left the house two hours ago. I watched him

go."

"He doesn't need to be here physically," she said, rubbing the back of her

neck.

"Are you all right?"

"I'm fine." From the tone of her voice they might have seen each other only

the day before. He felt foolish, as though his relief, his desire to pick her up and

run, was inappropriate, even redundant.

"We have to go," he said. "They may come back."

She shook her head. "No use," she told him.

"What do you mean, no use?"

"If you knew what he can do."

"Believe me, I've seen."

He thought of Bella, poor dead Bella, with her pups suckling rot. He'd seen

enough, and more.

"There's no use trying to escape," she insisted. "He's got access to my

head. I'm an open book to him." This was an overstatement. He was less and less able

to control her. But she was tired of the fight: almost as tired as the European. She

wondered sometimes if he hadn't infected her with his world-weariness; if a trace of

him in her cortex hadn't tainted every possibility with the knowledge of its

dissolution. She saw that now, in Marty, whose face she'd dreamed, whose body she'd

wanted. Saw how he would age, would wind down and die, as everything wound down and

died. Why stand up at all, the disease in her system asked, if it's only a matter of

time before you fall down again?

"Can't you block him out?" Marty demanded.

"I'm too weak to resist him. With you I'll be weaker still."

"Why?" The remark appalled him.

"As soon as I relax, he'll get through. Do you see? The moment I surrender

to anything, anyone, he can break in."

Marty thought about Carys' face on the pillow, and the way, for an insane

Page 357

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

moment, another face had seemed to peer down between her fingers.
The Last European

had been watching, even then; sharing the experience. A ménage à trois for male,

female and occupying spirit. Its obscenity touched deeper chords of anger in him:

not the superficial rage of a righteous man, but a profound rejection of the

European in all his decadence. Whatever happened as a consequence, he would not be

talked into leaving Carys to Mamoulia's devices. If need be he'd take her against

her will. When she was out of this buzzing house, with the despair peeling the

wallpaper, she'd remember how good life could be; he'd make her remember. He stepped

toward her again, and went down on his haunches to touch her. She flinched.

"He's occupied-" he reassured her, "-he's at the casino."

"He'll kill you," she said simply, "if he finds you've been here."

"He'll kill me whatever happens now. I've interfered. I've seen his

hidey-hole, and I'm going to do damage to it before we go, just so he remembers me."

"Do whatever you want to do." She shrugged. "It's up to you. But leave me

be."

"So Papa was right," Marty said bitterly.

"Papa? What did he tell you?"

"That you wanted to be with Mamouljian all along."

"No."

"You want to be like him!"

"No, Marty, no!"

"I suppose he supplies the best-quality dope, eh? And I can't, can I?"
She

didn't deny this; just looked sullen. "What the fuck am I doing here?"
he said.

"You're happy, aren't you? Christ; you're happy."

It was laughable to think how he'd misunderstood the politics of this

rescue. She was content in this hovel, as long as she was supplied. Her
talk of

Mamouljian's invasions were window dressing. In her heart she could
forgive him every

crime he perpetrated as long as the dope kept coming.

He stood up. "Where's his room?"

"No, Marty."

"I want to see where he sleeps. Where is it?"

She pulled herself up on his arm. Her hands were hot and damp.

"Please leave, Marty. This isn't a game. It's not all going to be forgiven

when we come to the end, you know? It doesn't even stop when you die. Do you

understand what I'm saying?"

"Oh, yes," he said, "I understand." He put his palm on her face. Her breath

smelled sour. His too, he thought, but for the whisky.

"I'm not an innocent any longer. I know what's going on. Not all of it, but

enough. I've seen things I pray I never see again; I've heard stories . . . Christ,

I understand." How could he impress it upon her forcibly enough? "I'm shit-scared.

I've never been so scared in my life."

"You've got reason," she said coldly.

"Don't you care what happens to you?"

"Not much."

"I'll find you dope," he said. "If that's all that's keeping you here; I'll get it for you."

Did a doubt cross her face? He pressed the point home. "I saw you looking

for me at the funeral."

"You were there?"

"Why were you looking if you didn't want me to come?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. I thought maybe you'd gone with Papa."

"Dead, you mean?"

She frowned at him. "No. Gone away. Wherever he's gone."

It took a moment for her words to sink in. At last, he said: "You mean he's

not dead?"

She shook her head. "I thought you knew. I thought you'd be involved with

his getaway."

Of course the old bastard wasn't dead. Great men didn't just lie down and

die offstage. They bided their time through the middle acts-revered, mourned and

vilified-before appearing to play some final scene or other. A death scene; a

marriage.

"Where is he?" Marty asked.

"I don't know, and neither does Mamoulion. He tried to get me to find him,

the way I found Toy; but I can't do it. I've lost focus. I even tried to find you

Page 358

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

once. It was useless. I could scarcely think my way beyond the front door."

"But you found Toy?"

"That was at the beginning. Now . . . I'm used up. I tell him it hurts.
Like

something's going to break inside me." Pain, remembered and actual,
registered on

her face.

"And you still want to stay?"

"It'll be over soon. For all of us."

"Come with me. I've got friends who can help us," he appealed to her,
gripping her wrists. "Gentle God, can't you see I need you? Please. I
need you."

"I'm no use. I'm weak."

"Me too. I'm weak too. We deserve each other."

The thought, in its cynicism, seemed to please her. She pondered it a
moment

before saying, "Maybe we do," very quietly. Her face was a maze of
indecision; dope

and doubt. Finally she said: "I'll dress."

He hugged her, hard, breathing the staleness of her hair, knowing that
this

first victory might be his only one, but jubilating nevertheless. She
gently broke

his embrace and turned to the business of preparing to go. He watched
her while she

pulled on her jeans, but her self-consciousness made him leave her to
it. He stepped

onto the landing. Out of her presence, the hum filled his ears; louder now, he

thought, than it had been. Switching on his flashlight he climbed the last flight of

stairs to Mamoulia's room. With each step he took the whine deepened; it sounded in

the boards of the stairs and in the walls-a living presence.

On the top landing there was only one door; the room beyond it apparently

spread over the entire top floor. Mamoulia, the natural aristocrat, had taken the

choicest space for himself. The door had been left open. The European feared no

intruder. When Marty pushed, it swung inward a few inches, but his reluctant

flashlight beam failed to penetrate more than an arm's length into the darkness

beyond. He stood on the threshold like a child hesitating in front of a ghost-train

ride.

During his peripheral association with Mamoulia he had come to feel an

intense curiosity about the man. There was harm there, no doubt of that, perhaps

terrible capacities for violence. But just as Mamoulia's face had appeared beneath

Carys', there was probably a face under that of the European. More than one,

perhaps. Half a hundred faces, each stranger than the one before,
regressing toward

some state that was older than Bethlehem. He had to have one peep,
didn't he? One

look, for old times' sake. Girding his loins, he pushed forward into the
living

darkness of the room.

"Marty!"

Something flickered in front of him, a bubble burst in his head as
Carys

called up to him.

"Marty! I'm ready!" The hum in the room seemed to have risen as he
entered.

Now, as he withdrew, it lowered itself to a moan of disappointment.
Don't go, it

seemed to sigh. Why go? She can wait. Let her wait. Stay awhile up
here and see

what's to be seen.

"There's no time," Carys said.

Almost angered to have been summoned away, Marty closed the door
on the

voice, and went down.

"I don't feel good," she said, when he joined her on the lower landing.

"Is it him? Is he trying to get to you?"

"No. I'm just dizzy. I didn't realize that I'd got so weak."

"There's a car outside," he said, offering a supportive hand. She waved

him

off.

"There's a parcel of my things," she said. "In the room."

He went back to get it, and was picking it up when she made a small noise of

complaint, and stumbled on the stairs.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes," she said. When he appeared on the stairs beside her, pillowcase

parcel in hand, she gave him an ashen look. "The house wants me to stay," she

whispered.

"We'll take it steady," he said, and went ahead of her, for fear she stumble

again. They reached the hallway without further incident.

"We can't go by the front door," she said. "It's double-locked from the outside."

As they made their way back through the hall, they heard the unmistakable

Page 359

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

sound of the back door opening.

"Shit," Marty said, under his breath. He let go of Carys' arm and slipped

back through the gloom to the front door, and tried to open it. It was, as Carys had

warned, double-locked. Panic was rising in him, but in its confusion a still voice,

which he knew to be the voice of the room, said: No need to worry. Come up. Be safe

in me. Hide in me. He thrust the temptation aside. Carys' face was turned to his:

"It's Breer," she breathed. The dog-killer was in the kitchen. Marty could

hear him, smell him. Carys tapped at Marty's sleeve, and pointed to a bolted door

under the well of the stairs. Cellar, he guessed. Whitefaced in the murk, she

pointed down. He nodded.

Breer, about some business, was singing to himself. Strange, to think of him

happy, this lumbering slaughterer; content enough with his lot to sing.

Carys had slid the bolt open on the cellar door. Steps, dimly illuminated by

the thrown light from the kitchen, led down into the pit. A smell of disinfectant

and wood shaving: healthy smells. They crept down the stairs; cringing at each

scraped heel, each creaking step. But the Razor-Eater was too busy to hear, it

seemed. There was no howl of pursuit. Marty closed the cellar door on them,

desperately hoping freer would not notice that the bolts had been drawn, and

listened.

In time, the sound of running water; then the clink of cups, a teapot
perhaps: the monster was brewing camomile.

Breer's senses were not as acute as they had been. The heat of the
summer

made him listless and weak. His skin smelled, his hair was falling out,
his bowels

would scarcely move these days. He needed a holiday, he'd decided.
Once the European

had found Whitehead, and dispatched him-and that was surely only a
matter of days

away-he'd go and see the aurora borealis. That would mean leaving
his houseguest-he

felt her proximity, mere feet away-but by that time she would have
lost her appeal

anyway. He was more fickle than he used to be, and beauty was
transient. In two

weeks, three in cool weather, all their charms dispersed.

He sat down at the table and poured a cup of the camomile. Its scent,
once a

great joy to him, was too subtle for his dogged sinuses, but he drank it
for

tradition's sake. Later he'd go up to his room and watch the soap
operas he loved so

much; maybe he'd look in on Carys and watch her while she slept;
oblige her, if she

woke, to pass water in his presence. Lost in a reverie of toilet training,
he sat

and sipped his tea.

Marty had hoped the man would retire to his room with his brew, leaving them

access to the back door, but Breer was clearly staying put for awhile.

He reached back in the dark to Carys. She was on the stairs behind him,

trembling from head to toe, as was he. Foolishly he'd left his jimmy, his only

weapon, somewhere in the house; probably in Carys' room. Should it come to a

face-to-face confrontation, he was weaponless. Worse; time was passing. How long

before Mamouliau came home? His heart sank at the thought. He slid down the stairs,

hands on the cold brick of the wall, past Carys and into the body of the cellar

itself. Perhaps there was a weapon of some kind down here. Even, hope of hopes,

another exit from the house. There was very little light, however. He could see no

chinks to suggest a trapdoor or coalhole. Certain that he was out of direct line

with the door, he switched on his flashlight. The cellar was not entirely empty.

There was a tarpaulin strung up to divide it, an artificial wall.

He put his hand up to the low roof and guided himself across the cellar step

by tentative step, clinging to the pipes on the ceiling for equilibrium.

He pulled

the tarpaulin aside, and aimed the flashlight beam into the space beyond. As he did

so his stomach leaped up into his mouth. A cry almost came; he stifled it an instant

before it escaped.

A yard or two from where he stood was a table. At it sat a young girl. She

was staring at him.

He put his fingers to his mouth to hush her before she cried out. But there

was no need. She neither moved nor spoke. The glazed look on her face was not mental

deficiency. The child was dead, he now understood. There was dust on her.

"Oh, Christ," he said, very quietly.

Carys heard him. She turned, and made her way to the bottom of the steps.

"Marty?" she breathed.

"Stay away," he said, unable to unglue his eyes from the dead girl. There

was more than the body to feast his eyes upon. There were the knives and the plate

on the table in front of her, with a napkin lovingly shaken out and spread in her

lap. The plate, he saw, had meat on it, sliced thinly as if by a master butcher. He

moved past the body, trying to slide from under its gaze. As he passed the table he

brushed the silk napkin; it slid through the divide of the girl's legs.

Two horrors came, brutal twins, one upon the other. The napkin had neatly

covered a place on the girl's inner thigh from which the meat on her plate had been

carved. In the same moment came another recognition: that he had eaten such meat, at

Whitehead's encouragement, in the room at the estate. It had been the tastiest of

delicacies; he'd left his plate clean.

Nausea swept up him. He dropped the flashlight as he tried to fight the

sickness back, but it was beyond his physical control. The bitter odor of stomach

acid filled the cellar. All at once there was no hiding, no help for this insanity

but to throw it up and take the consequences.

Overhead, the Razor-Eater raised himself from his tea, pushed back his chair

and came out of the kitchen.

"Who?" his thick voice demanded. "Who's down there?"

He crossed unerringly to the cellar door and pulled it open. Dead fluorescent light rolled down the stairs.

"Who's there?" he said again, and now he was coming down in pursuit of the

light, his feet thundering on the wooden steps. "What are you doing?" He was

shouting, his voice was at hysteria pitch. "You can't come down here!"

Marty looked up, dizzied by breathlessness, to see Carys crossing the cellar

toward him: Her eyes alighted on the tableau at the table but she kept admirable

control, ignoring the body and reaching for the knife and fork that sat beside the

plate. She snatched them both up, catching the tablecloth in her haste. The plate

and its flyblown serving spun to the floor; knives cluttered beside it.

Breer had paused at the bottom of the stairs to take in the desecration of

his temple. Now, appalled, he came careering toward the infidels, his size lending

awesome momentum to the attack. Dwarfed by him, Carys half-turned as he reached for

her, roaring. She was eclipsed. Marty couldn't make out who was where. But the

confusion lasted only seconds. Then Breer was raising his gray hands as if to push

Carys off, his head shaking to and fro. A howl was issuing from him, more of

complaint than pain.

Carys ducked his flailing, and slipped sideways out of harm's way. The

knife

and fork she had held were no longer in her hands. Breer had run straight onto them.

He seemed not to be aware of their presence in his gut, however. His concern was for

the girl whose body was even now toppling and falling into a rubber-jointed heap on

the cellar floor. He rushed to her comfort, ignoring the desecraters in his anguish.

Carys caught sight of Marty, his face a greaseball, hauling himself upright by

hanging on to the ceiling pipes.

"Move!" she yelled at him. She waited long enough to see that he had

responded and then made for the stairs. As she clattered up the steps toward the

light, she heard the Razor-Eater behind him, shouting: "No! No!" She glanced over

her shoulder. Marty gained the bottom of the stairs just as Breer's hands-manicured,

perfumed and lethal-grabbed for him. Marty threw an ill-aimed swipe backward, and

Breer lost his hold. It was a moment's grace, however, no more. Marty was only

halfway up the stairs before his attacker was back on his heels. The rouged face was

smear as it peered up from the cellar depths, the features so contorted by outrage

that they appeared scarcely human.

This time Breer's grasp caught Marty's trousers, the fingers digging deeply

into the muscle of his skin. Marty yelped as cloth tore and blood ran. He flung out

a hand to Carys, who loaned what strength she had left to the contest, pulling Marty

up toward her. Breer, badly balanced, lost his snatched grip, and Marty stumbled up

the stairs, pressing Carys ahead of him. She tumbled into the hallway, and Marty

followed, with Breer at his back. At the top of the stairs Marty suddenly turned and

kicked. His heel struck the Razor-Eater's punctured belly. Breer fell backward,

hands clawing the air for support; there was none to be had. His nails managed to

rake the brickwork as he toppled and fell heavily down the steps, hitting the stone

floor of the cellar with a lazy thud. There, sprawled, he lay still; a painted

giant.

Marty slammed the door on him, and bolted it. He felt too squeamish to look

at the gouging on his leg, but he could tell by the warmth soaking into sock and

shoe that it was bleeding badly.

"Can you . . . you get something . . ." he said, ". . . just to cover it?"

Too breathless to reply, Carys nodded, and rounded the corner into

the

Page 361

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

kitchen. There was a towel on the draining board, but it was too unsavory to be used

on an open wound. She started to search for something clean, however primitive. It

was time they were gone; Mamoulian would not stay out all night.

In the hallway, Marty listened for any sound from the cellar. He heard none.

Another noise infiltrated, however, one that he'd almost forgotten about.

The buzz of the house was back in his head, and that mellow voice was threaded into

it, a dreamy undercurrent. Common sense told him to shut it out. But when he

listened, trying to sort out its syllables, it seemed the nausea and the pain in his

leg subsided.

On the back of a kitchen chair Carys had found one of Mamoulian's dark-gray

shirts. The European was fastidious about his laundry. The shirt had been recently

laundered; an ideal bandage. She tore it up-though its fine-quality cotton

resisted-then soaked a length of it in cold water to clean the wound, and made

strips of the rest to bind the leg up. When she was done, she went out into the

hallway. But Marty had gone.

55

He had to see. Or if seeing wouldn't do (What was seeing anyway? Mere sensuality)

then he would learn a new way of knowing. That was the promise the room whispered in

his ear: a new thing to know and a way of knowing it. He pulled himself up the

banisters, hand over hand, less and less aware of the pain as he climbed to the

buzzing darkness. He wanted so much to take the ghost-train ride. There were dreams

in there. he'd never dreamed, would never have a chance to dream again. Blood

squelched in his shoe; he laughed at it. A spasm had begun in his leg; he ignored

it. The last steps were ahead: he climbed them with steady work. The door was ajar.

He achieved the summit of the stairs and limped toward it.

Though it was totally dark in the cellar, that scarcely concerned the

Razor-Eater. It was many weeks since his eyes had worked as well as they'd used to:

he'd learned to substitute touch for sight. He stood up and tried to think clearly.

Soon the European would come home. There would be punishment for leaving the house

unattended and letting this escape take place. Worse than that, he would not see the

girl anymore; no longer be able to watch her pass water, that fragrant water he

preserved for special occasions. He was desolate.

He heard her moving even now in the hallway above him; she was going up the

stairs. The rhythm of her tiny feet was familiar to him, he'd listened long nights

and days to her padding back and forth in her cell. In his mind's eye the ceiling of

the cellar became transparent; he looked up between her legs as she climbed the

stairs; that lavish slit gaped. It made him angry to be losing it, and her. She was

old, of course, not like the pretty at the table, or the others on the streets, but

there had been times when her presence had been the one thing keeping him from

insanity.

He went back, stumbling in the pitch, in the direction of his little

autocannibal, whose dining had been so rudely interrupted. Before he got to her, his

foot kicked at one of the carving knives he'd left on the table should she want to

help herself. He went down on all fours and patted the ground until he found it, and

then he crawled back up the stairs and started to hack at the wood

where the light

through the door crack showed the bolts to be.

Carys didn't want to go to the top of the house again. There was so much up there

she feared. Innuendo rather than fact, but enough to make her weak. Why Marty had

gone up-and that was the only place he could have gone-confounded her. Despite his

claim to understanding, there was still so much he had to learn.

"Marty?" she'd called, at the foot of the stairs, hoping he'd appear at the

top, smiling, and limp down to her without her having to go up and fetch him. But

her inquiry was met with silence, and the night wasn't getting any younger. The

European might come to the door at any moment.

Unwillingly, she started up the stairs.

Marty had never understood until now. He'd been a virgin, living in a world innocent

of this deep and exhilarating penetration, not simply of body, of mind too. The air

in the room closed around his head as soon as he stepped into it. The plates of his

skull seemed to grind against each other; the voice of the room, no longer needing

its whispered tones, shouted in his brain. So you came? Of course you came. Welcome

to Wonderland. He was dimly aware that it was his own voice that was speaking these

Page 362

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

words. It had probably been his voice all along. He had been talking to himself like

a lunatic. Even though he'd now seen through the trick, the voice came again, lower

this time-This is a fine place to find yourself in, don't you think?

At the question, he looked around. There was nothing to see, not even walls.

If there were windows in the room, they were hermetically sealed. Not a chink of the

outside world belonged in here.

"I don't see anything," he murmured in reply to the room's boast.

The voice laughed; he laughed with it.

Nothing here to be frightened of, it said. Then, after a smirking pause:

Nothing here at all.

And that was right, wasn't it? Nothing at all. It wasn't just darkness that

kept him sightless, it was the room itself. He glanced giddily over his shoulder: he

could no longer see the door behind him, even though he knew he had left it open

when he came in. There should have been at least a glimmer of light from downstairs

spilling into the room. But that illumination had been eaten up, as was the beam of

his flashlight. A smothering gray fog pressed so close to his eyes that even if he

lifted his hand up in front of him he could see nothing.

You're all right here, the room soothed him. No judges here; no bars here.

"Am I blind?" he asked.

No, the room replied. You're seeing truly for the first time.

"I . . . don't . . . like it."

Of course you don't. But you'll learn in time. Living's not for you. Ghosts

of ghosts, the living are. You want to lie down; be done with that caper. Nothing's

essential, boy.

"I want to leave."

Would I tell you lies?

"I want to leave . . . please."

You're in safe hands.

"Please."

He stumbled forward, confused as to which way the door was. In front, or

behind? Arms spread before him like a blind man on a cliff edge, he reeled, looking

for some point of security. This wasn't the adventure he'd thought it would be; it

was nothing. Nothing is essential. Once stepped into, this boundless nowhere had

neither distance nor depth, north nor south. And everything outside it- the stairs,

the landing, the stairs below that, the hallway, Carys- all of it was like a

fabrication. A dream of palpability, not a true place. There was no true place but

here. All he'd lived and experienced, all he'd taken joy in, taken pain in, it was

insubstantial. Passion was dust. Optimism, self-deception. He doubted now even the

memory of senses: the textures, the temperatures. Color, form, pattern. All

diversions- games the mind had invented to disguise this unbearable zero. And why

not? Looking too long into the abyss would madden a man.

Not mad, surely? said the room, savoring the thought.

Always, even in his blackest moments (lying on a bunk in a hothouse cell,

listening to the man in the bed below sob in his sleep) there had been something to

look forward to: a letter, a dawn, release; some glimpse of meaning.

But here, meaning was dead. Future and past were dead. Love and life were

dead. Even death was dead, because anything that excited emotion was unwelcome here.

Only nothing: once and for all, nothing.

"Help me," he said, like a lost child.

Go to Hell, the room respectfully replied; and for the first time in his life, he knew exactly what that meant.

On the second landing, Carys stopped. She could hear voices; not, now she

listened more closely, plural, but the same voice-Marty's voice-speaking and

answering itself. It was difficult to know where the exchange was coming from; the

words seemed to be everywhere and nowhere. She glanced into her room, then into

Breer's. Finally, steeling herself for a repeat of her nightmare, she looked into

the bathroom. He was in none of them. There was no avoiding the unpalatable

conclusion. He'd gone upstairs, back to Mamoulia's room.

Even as she crossed the landing to the flight of stairs that led up to the

top story, another sound caught her attention: somewhere below a blade was hacking

wood. She knew at once it was the Razor-Eater. He was up and itching to come for

her. What a house this is, she thought, for all its bland facade. It would take

another Dante to describe its depths and heights: dead children, Razor-Eaters,

addicts, madmen and all. Surely the stars that hung at its zenith squirmed in their

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

settings; in the earth beneath it, the magma curdled.

In the European's room, Marty cried out, a bewildered plea. Calling his name

in answer, and hoping to God he heard her, she scrambled to the top of the stairs

and crossed, heart in mouth, toward the door.

He had fallen to his knees; what was left of his self-preservation was a tattered

and hopeless thought, gray on gray. Even the voice had stopped now. It was bored

with the banter. Besides, it had taught its lesson well. Nothing is essential, it

had said, and shown him the why and how; or rather dug up that part of him that had

known all along. Now he would just wait for the progenitor of this elegant syllogism

to come and dispatch him. He lay down, not certain if he was alive or dead, if the

man who would presently come would kill him or resurrect him: only certain that to

lie down was easiest, in this, the emptiest of all possible worlds.

Carys had been in this Nowhere before. She'd tasted its flat, futile air. But in the

past few hours she had glimpsed something beyond its aridity. There had been

victories today; not large, perhaps, but victories nevertheless. She thought of the

way Marty had come, his eyes with more than lust in them. That was a victory, wasn't

it? She'd won that feeling out of him, earned it in some incalculable way. She would

not be beaten by this last oppressor, this stale beast that smothered her senses. It

was only the European's residue, after all. His sloughings, left to decorate his

bower. Scurf; dross. It and he were contemptible.

"Marty," she said. "Where are you?"

"Nowhere . . ." came a voice.

She followed it, stumbling. Desolation pressed in, insisting on her.

Breer paused for a moment. A long way off, he heard voices. He couldn't make out the

words, but the sense was academic. They hadn't escaped yet, that was the important

thing. He had plans for them once he got out: especially the man. He would divide

him into tiny pieces, until not even his loved ones could tell which part was his

finger, which his face.

He began to hack at the wood with renewed fervor. Under his relentless

attack the door finally began to splinter.

Carys followed Marty's voice through the fog, but he eluded her.

Either he was

moving around or else the room was somehow deceiving her, echoing his voice off the

walls, or even impersonating him. Then his voice called her name, close by. She

turned in the murk, utterly without bearings. There was no sign of the door she'd

entered by-it had disappeared, as had the windows. The pieces of her resolve began

to unglue. Doubt seeped in, smirking.

Well, well. And who are you? somebody asked. Perhaps herself.

"I know my name," she breathed. It wasn't going to unseat her that way. "I

know my name."

She was a pragmatist, damn it! She wasn't prone to believing that the world

was all in the mind. That's why she'd gone to H: the world was too real. Now here

was this vapor in her ears, telling her she was nothing, everything was nothing;

nameless muck.

"Shit," she told it. "You're shit. His shit!"

It didn't deign to reply; she took the advantage while she had it.

"Marty. Can you hear me?" There was no answer. "It's just a room, Marty. Can

you hear me? That's all it is! Just a room."

You've been in me before, the voice in her head pointed out.
Remember?

Oh, yes; she remembered. There was a tree in this fog somewhere;
she'd seen

it in the sauna. It was a blossom-laden freak of a tree, and under it
she'd glimpsed

such horrid sights. Was that where Marty had gone? Was he hanging
from it even now:

new fruit?

Damn it, no! She mustn't give in to such thoughts. It was just a room.
She

could find the walls if she concentrated, even find the window maybe.

Careless of what she might stumble over, she turned to her right, and
walked

four paces, five, until her outstretched hands hit the wall: it was
shockingly,

splendidly solid. Ha! she thought, fuck you and your tree! Look what
I've found. She

put her palms flat on the wall. Now; left or right? She threw up an
imaginary coin.

It came down heads, and she started to edge along to her left.

No you don't, the room whispered.

Page 364

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"Try stopping me."

Nowhere to go, it spat back, just round and round. You've always gone
round

and round, haven't you? Weak, lazy, ridiculous woman.

"You call me ridiculous. You. A talking fog."

The wall she was moving steadily along seemed to stretch on and on.
After

half a dozen paces she began to doubt the theory she was testing.
Perhaps this was a

manipulable space after all. Perhaps she was moving away from Marty
along some new

Wall of China. But she clung to the cold surface as tenaciously as a
climber to a

sheer cliff. If necessary she would make her way around the entire
room until she

found the door, Marty, or both.

Pure cunt, the room said. That's all you are. Can't even find your way
out

of a little maze like this. Better just lie down and take what's coming
to you, the

way good cunts should.

Did she sense a note of desperation in this fresh assault?

Despair? said the room. I thrive on it. Cunt.

She had reached a corner of the room. Now she turned along the next
wall.

No you don't, said the room.

Yes I do, she thought.

I wouldn't go that way. Oh, no. Really I wouldn't. The Razor-Eater's up
here

with you. Can't you hear him? He's just a few inches ahead of you. No, don't! Oh,

please don't! I hate the smell of blood.

Pure histrionics; that was all it could muster. The more the room panicked,

the more her spirits rose.

Stop! For your own sake! Stop!

Even as it shouted in her head her hands found the window. This was what it

was so frightened she'd discover.

CUNT! it shrieked. You'll be sorry. I promise you. Oh, yes.

There were no curtains or shutters; the window had been entirely boarded up

so that nothing could spoil this perfect nullity. Her fingers scrabbled for purchase

on one of the planks: it was time she let some outside world in. The wood had been

very firmly nailed in place, however. Though she tugged, there was little or no

give.

"Shift, damn you!"

The plank creaked, splinters sprang off it. "Yes," she coaxed, "here we are." Light, a fractured, all-too-uncertain thread of it, filtered between the

planks. "Come on," she cajoled, pulling harder. The top joints of her fingers were

bent back in her effort to wrest the wood from its place, but the thread of light

had now widened to a beam. It fell on her, and through a veil of dirty air she began

to make out the shape of her own hands.

It wasn't daylight that spilled between the planks. Just the glimmer of streetlamps and car headlights, of starlight perhaps, of televisions blazing in a

dozen houses along Caliban Street. It was sufficient, though. With every inch the

gap increased, more certainty invaded the room; edge and substance.

Elsewhere in the room, Marty too felt the light. It irritated him, like someone throwing open spring-morning curtains on a dying man. He crabbed his way

across the floor, trying to bury himself in the fog before it dispersed, seeking out

the reassuring voice that would tell him nothing was essential. But it had gone. He

was deserted, and the light was falling in broader and yet broader strokes. He could

see a woman outlined against the window. She had wrenched off one plank and thrown

it down. Now she was pulling at a second. "Come to Mama," she was saying, and the

light came, defining her within ever more nauseating detail. He wanted none of it;

it was a burden, this being business. He exhaled a little whistle of pain and

exasperation.

She turned to him. "There you are," she said, crossing to him and pulling

him to his feet. "We've got to be quick."

Marty was staring at the room, which was now revealed in all its banality. A

mattress on the floor; an upturned porcelain cup; beside it, a water jug.

"Wake up," Carys said, shaking him.

No need to go, he thought; nothing to lose if I stay here and the gray comes

again.

"For Christ's sake, Marty!" she yelled at him. From below came the sound of

wood shrieking. He's coming, ready or not, she thought.

"Marty," she shouted at him. "Can you hear? It's Breer."

The name awoke horrors. A cold girl, sitting at her table laid with her own

Page 365

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

meat. His terrible, unspeakable joke. The image slapped the fog from Marty's head.

The thing that had performed that horror was downstairs; he remembered now, all too

well. He looked at Carys with clear, if tearful, eyes.

"What happened?"

"No time," she said.

He limped after her toward the door. She was still carrying one of the planks she'd pulled from the window, its nails still in place. The noise from below

mounted still, the din of unhinged door and mind.

The pain in Marty's torn leg, which the room had so skillfully dulled, now

raged up again. He needed support from Carys to make his way down the first flight

of stairs. They made the descent together, his hand, bloody from touching the wound,

marking their passage on the wall.

Halfway down the second flight of stairs, the cacophony from the cellar

stopped.

They stood still, waiting for Breer's next move. From below there came a

thin creak as the Razor-Eater pushed the cellar door wide. Other than the dim light

from the kitchen, which had several corners to round before it reached the hallway,

there was nothing to illuminate the scene. Hunter and prey, both camouflaged by

darkness, hung on to this tenuous moment, neither knowing if the next would bring

catastrophe. Carys left Marty behind and slipped down the remaining steps to the

bottom of the stairs. Her feet were all but silent on the carpetless stairs, but

after the sense deprivation of Mamoulia's room Marty heard her every heartbeat.

Nothing moved in the hallway; she beckoned Marty down after her. The

passageway was still, and apparently empty. Breer was near, she knew: but where? He

was large and cumbersome: hiding places would be difficult to find. Perhaps, she

prayed, he hadn't escaped after all, merely given up, exhausted. She stepped

forward.

Without warning, the Razor-Eater emerged from the door of the front room,

roaring. The carving knife descended in a swooping stroke. She succeeded in

sidestepping the blow, but in doing so all but lost her balance. It was Marty's hand

that caught her arm, and dragged her out of the way of Breer's second slash. The

force of the Razor-Eater's charge propelled him past her. He slammed against the

front door; the glass rattled.

"Out!" Marty said, seeing the way clear along the passage. But this time

Carys had no intention of running. There was a time for running and a time for

confrontation; she might never have another opportunity to thank Breer for his many

humiliations. She shrugged Marty's hold off and took the wooden club she still

carried in a two-handed grasp.

The Razor-Eater had righted himself, the knife still in his hand, and now he

took a raging step toward her. She preempted his attack, however. She raised the

plank and ran at him, delivering a blow to the side of his head. His neck, already

fractured by his fall, snapped. The nails in the plank pierced his skull, and she

was obliged to relinquish her weapon, leaving it fixed like a fifth limb to the side

of Breer's head. He fell to his knees. His twitching hand dropped the knife while

the other scrabbled for the plank and wrenched it from his head. She was glad of the

darkness; the slosh of blood and the tattoo his feet beat on the bare boards were

more than enough to appall. He knelt upright for several moments, then pitched

forward, pressing the cutlery in his belly all the way home.

She was satisfied. This time, when Marty pulled at her, she went with him.

As they made their way along the corridor there was a sharp rapping on the

wall. They stopped. What now? More possessing spirits?

"What is it?" he asked.

The rapping ceased, then began again, this time accompanied by a voice.

"Be quiet, will you? There's people trying to sleep in here."

"Next door," she said. The thought of their complaints struck her as funny,

and by the time they'd made their way out of the house, past the wreckage of the

cellar door and Breer's cooling camomile, they were both laughing.

They slipped away down the darkened alleyway behind the house to the car,

where they sat for several minutes, tears and laughter coming on them in alternating

waves; two mad people, the Calibanese might have guessed; or else adulterers, amused

by a night of adventures.

XI

Page 366

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

Kingdom Come

56

Chad Schuckman and Tom Loomis had been bringing the message of the Church of the

Resurrected Saints to the populace of London for three weeks now, and they were sick

to the back teeth of it. "Some way to spend a vacation," Tom grumbled daily as they

planned their day's route. Memphis seemed a long way off, and they were both

homesick for it. Besides, the whole campaign was proving a failure. The sinners they

encountered on the doorsteps of this godforsaken city were as indifferent to the

Reverend's message of imminent Apocalypse as they were to his promise of

Deliverance.

Despite the weather (or maybe because of it), sin wasn't hot news in England

these days. Chad was contemptuous: "They don't know what they've got coming," he

kept telling Tom, who knew all the descriptions of the Deluge by heart but also knew

they sounded better from the lips of a golden boy like Chad than from himself. He

even suspected that those few people who did stop to listen did so more because Chad

had the looks of a corn-fed angel than because they wanted to hear the Reverend's

inspired word. Most simply slammed their doors.

But Chad was adamant. "There's sin here," he assured Tom, "and where there's

sin there's guilt. And where there's guilt there's money for the Lord's Work." It

was a simple equation: and if Tom had some doubts about its ethics he kept them to

himself. Better his silence than Chad's disapprobation; all they had was each other

in this foreign city, and Tom wasn't about to lose his guiding light.

Sometimes, though, it was difficult to keep your faith intact. Especially on

blistering days like this, when your polyester suit was itching at the back of your

neck and the Lord, if He was in His Heaven, was keeping well out of sight. Not a

hint of a breeze to cool your face; not a rain cloud in sight.

"Isn't this from something?" Tom asked Chad.

"What's that?" Chad was counting the pamphlets they still had left to distribute today.

"The name of the street," Tom said. "Caliban. It's from something."

"That so?" Chad had finished counting. "We only got rid of five pamphlets."

He handed the armful of literature to Tom and fished for a comb in the

inside pocket of his jacket. Despite the heat, he looked cool and unruffled. By

comparison, Tom felt shabby, overheated and, he feared, easily tempted from the path

of righteousness. By what, he wasn't certain, but he was open to suggestions. Chad

put the comb through his hair, restoring in one elegant sweep the

perfect sheen of

his halo. It was important, the Reverend taught, to look your best.
"You're agents

of the Lord," he'd said. "He wants you to be clean and tidy; to shine
through every

nook and cranny."

"Here," Chad said, exchanging the comb for the pamphlets. "Your
hair's a

mess."

Tom took the comb; its teeth had gold in them. He made a desultory
attempt

to control his coxcomb, while Chad looked on. Tom's hair wouldn't lie
flat the way

Chad's did. The Lord probably tutted at that: He wouldn't like it at all.
But then

what did the Lord like? He disapproved of smoking, drinking,
fornication, tea,

coffee, Pepsi, roller coasters, masturbation. And for those weak
creatures who

indulged in any or, God help them, all of the above the Deluge
hovered.

Tom just prayed that the waters, when they came, would be cool.

The guy in the dark suit who answered the door of Number Eighty-
two Caliban

Street reminded both Tom and Chad of the Reverend. Not physically,
of course. Bliss

was a tanned, glutinous man, while this dude was thin and sallow. But
there was the

same implicit authority about them both; the same seriousness of purpose. He was

drawn to the pamphlets too, the first real interest they'd had all morning. He even

quoted Deuteronomy at them-a text they were unfamiliar with-and then, offering them

both a drink, invited them into the house.

It was like home from home. The bare walls and floors; the smell of disinfectant and incense, as though something had just been cleaned up. Truth to

tell, Tom thought this guy had taken the asceticism to extremes. The back room he

led them into boasted two chairs, no more.

"My name is Mamoulia."

"How do you do? I'm Chad Schuckman, this is Thomas Loomis."

"Both saints, eh?" The young men looked mystified. "Your names. Both names

of saints."

Page 367

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"Saint Chad?" the blond one ventured.

"Oh, certainly. He was an English bishop; we're speaking of the seventh

century now. Thomas, of course, the great Doubter."

He left them awhile to fetch water. Tom squirmed in his chair.

"What's your problem?" Chad snapped. "He's the first sniff of a convert we've had over here."

"He's weird."

"You think the Lord cares if he's weird?" Chad said. It was a good question,

and one for which Tom was shaping a reply when their host came back in.

"Your water."

"Do you live alone?" Chad asked. "It's such a big house for one person."

"Of late I've been alone," Mamouljian said, proffering the glasses of water.

"And I must say, I'm in serious need of help."

I bet you are, Tom thought. The man looked at him as the idea flashed through his head, almost as though he'd said it aloud. Tom flushed, and drank his

water to cover his embarrassment. It was warm. Had the English never heard of

refrigerators? Mamouljian turned his attention back to Saint Chad.

"What are you two doing in the next few days?"

"The Lord's work," Chad returned patly.

Mamouljian nodded. "Good," he said.

"Spreading the word."

"`I will make you fishers of men.' "

"Matthew. Chapter Four," Chad returned.

"Perhaps," said Mamouliau, "if I allowed you to save my immortal soul, you

might help me?"

"Doing what?"

Mamouliau shrugged: "I need the assistance of two healthy young animals like

yourself."

Animals? That didn't sound too fundamentalist. Had this poor sinner never

heard of Eden? No, Tom thought, looking at the man's eyes; no, he probably never

has.

"I'm afraid we've got other commitments," Chad replied politely. "But we'll

be very happy to have you come along when the Reverend arrives, and have you

baptized."

"I'd like to meet the Reverend," the man returned. Tom wasn't certain if

this wasn't all a charade. "We have so little time before the Maker's wrath

descends," Mamouliau was saying. Chad nodded fervently. "Then we shall be as

flotsam-shall we not?-as flotsam in the flood."

The words were the Reverend's almost precisely. Tom heard them falling from

this man's narrow lips, and that accusation of being a Doubter came

home to roost.

But Chad was entranced. His face had that evangelical look that came over it during

sermons; the look that Tom had always envied, but now thought positively rabid.

"Chad . . ." he began.

"Flotsam in the flood," Chad repeated, "Hallelujah."

Tom put his glass down beside his chair. "I think we should be going," he

said, and got up. For some reason the bare boards he stood on seemed far more than

six feet away from his eyes: more like sixty. As though he was a tower about to

topple, his foundations dug away. "We've got so many streets to cover," he said,

trying to focus on the problem at hand, which was, in a nutshell, how to get out of

this house before something terrible happened.

"The Deluge," Mamoulian announced, "is almost upon us."

Tom reached toward Chad to wake him from his trance. The fingers at the end

of his outstretched arm seemed a thousand miles from his eyes. "Chad," he said.

Saint Chad; he of the halo, pissing rainbows.

"Are you all right, boy?" the stranger asked, swiveling his fish eyes in

Tom's direction.

"I . . . feel . . ."

"What do you feel?" Mamouliau asked.

Chad was looking at him too, face innocent of concern; innocent, in fact, of

all feeling. Perhaps this thought dawned on Tom for the first time—that was why

Chad's face was so perfect. White, symmetrical and completely empty.

"Sit down," the stranger said. "Before you fall down."

"It's all right," Chad reassured him.

"No," Tom said. His knees felt disobedient. He suspected they'd give out

Page 368

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

very soon.

"Trust me," Chad said. Tom wanted to. Chad had usually been right in the

past. "Believe me, we're on to a good thing here. Sit down, like the gentleman

said."

"Is it the heat?"

"Yes," Chad told the man on Tom's behalf. "It's the heat. It gets hot in

Memphis; but we've got air-conditioning." He turned to Tom and put his hand on his

companion's shoulder. Tom let himself give in to weakness, and sat down. He felt a

fluttering at the back of his neck, as though a hummingbird was hovering there, but

he didn't have the willpower to flick it away.

"You call yourselves agents?" the man said, almost under his breath. "I don't think you know the meaning of the word."

Chad was quick to their defense.

"The Reverend says-"

"The Reverend?" the man interrupted contemptuously. "Do you think he had the

slightest idea of your value?"

This flummoxed Chad. Tom tried to tell his friend not to be flattered, but

the words wouldn't come. His tongue lay in his mouth like a dead fish. Whatever

happens now, he thought, at least it'll happen to us together. They'd been friends

since first grade; they'd tasted pubescence and metaphysics together; Tom thought of

them as inseparable. He hoped the man understood that where Chad went, Tom went too.

The fluttering at his neck had stopped; a warm reassurance was creeping over his

head. Things didn't seem so bad after all.

"I need help from you young men."

"To do what?" Chad asked.

"To begin the Deluge," Mamouljian replied. A smile, uncertain at first

but

broadening as the idea caught his imagination, appeared on Chad's face. His

features, too often sober with zeal, ignited.

"Oh, yes," he said. He glanced across at Tom. "Hear what this man's telling

us?"

Tom nodded.

"You hear, man?"

"I hear. I hear."

All his blissful life Chad had waited for this invitation. For the first time he could picture the literal reality behind the destruction he'd threatened on

a hundred doorsteps. In his mind waters-red, raging waters-mounted into foam-crested

waves and bore down on this pagan city. We are as flotsam in the flood, he said, and

the words brought images with them. Men and women-but mostly women-running naked

before these curling tides. The water was hot; rains of it fell on their screaming

faces, their gleaming, jiggling breasts. This was what the Reverend had promised all

along; and here was this man asking them to help make it all possible, to bring this

thrashing, foamy Day of Days to consummation. How could they refuse? He felt the

urge to thank the man for considering them worthy. The thought fathered the action.

His knees bent, and he fell to the floor at Mamouliau's feet.

"Thank you," he said to the man with the dark suit.

"You'll help me, then?"

"Yes . . ." Chad replied; wasn't this homage sign enough? "Of course."

Behind him, Tom murmured his own concession.

"Thank you," Chad said. "Thank you."

But when he looked up the man, apparently convinced by their devotion, had

already left the room.

57

Marty and Carys slept together in his single bed: long, rewarding sleep. If the baby

in the room below them cried in the night, they didn't hear it. Nor did they hear

the sirens on Kilburn High Road, police and fire engines going to a conflagration in

Maida Vale. Dawn through the dirty window didn't wake them either, though the

curtains had not been drawn. But once, in the early hours, Marty turned in his sleep

and his eyes flickered open to see the first light of day at the glass. Rather than

turning away from it, he let it fall on his lids as they flickered down again.

They had half a day together in the flat before the need began; bathing

themselves, drinking coffee, saying very little. Carys washed and

bound the wound on

Marty's leg; they changed their clothes, ditching those they'd worn the previous

Page 369

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

night.

It wasn't until the middle of the afternoon that they started to talk.
The

dialogue began quite calmly, but Carys' nervousness escalated as she felt hungrier

for a fix, and the talk rapidly became a desperate diversion from her jittering

belly. She told Marty what life with the European had been like: the humiliations,

the deceptions, the sense she had that he knew her father, and her too, better than

she guessed. Marty in his turn attempted to paraphrase the story Whitehead had told

him on that last night, but she was too distracted to concentrate properly. Her

conversation became increasingly agitated.

"I have to have a fix, Marty."

"Now?"

"Pretty soon."

He'd been waiting for this moment and dreading it. Not because he couldn't

find her a supply; he knew he could. But because he'd hoped somehow she'd be able to

resist the need when she was with him.

"I feel really bad," she said.

"You're all right. You're with me."

"He'll come, you know."

"Not now, he won't."

"He'll be angry, and he'll come."

Marty's mind went back and back again to his experience in the upstairs room

of Caliban Street. What he had seen there, or rather not seen there, had terrified

him more profoundly than the dogs or Breer. Those were merely physical dangers. But

what had gone on in the room was a danger of another order altogether. He had felt,

perhaps for the first time in his life, that his soul—a notion he had hitherto

rejected as Christian flim-flam—had been threatened. What he meant by the word he

wasn't certain; not, he suspected, what the pope meant. But some part of him more

essential than limb or life had been almost eclipsed, and Mamouljian had been

responsible. What more could the creature unleash, if pressed? His curiosity was

more now than an idle desire to know what was behind the veil: it

had become a

necessity. How could they hope to arm themselves against this demagogue without some

clue to his nature?

"I don't want to know," Carys said, reading his thoughts. "If he comes, he

comes. There's nothing we can do about it."

"Last night-" he began, about to remind her of how they had won the skirmish. She waved the thought away before it was finished. The strain on her face

was unbearable; her need was flaying her.

"Marty . . ."

He looked across at her.

". . . you promised," she said accusingly.

"I haven't forgotten."

He'd done the mental arithmetic in his head: not the cost of the drug itself, but of lost pride. He would have to go to Flynn for the heroin; he knew no

one else he could trust. They were both fugitives now, from Mamoulia and from the

law.

"I'll have to make a phone call," he said.

"Make it," she replied.

She seemed to have physically altered in the last half-hour. Her skin was

waxy; her eyes had a desperate gleam in them; the shaking was worsening by the

minute.

"Don't make it easy for him," she said.

He frowned: "Easy?"

"He can make me do things I don't want to," she said. Tears had started to

run. There was no accompanying sob, just a free-fall from the eyes. "Maybe make me

hurt you."

"It's all right. I'll go now. There's a guy lives with Charmaine, he'll be able to get me stuff, don't worry. You want to come?"

She hugged herself. "No," she said. "I'll slow you down. Just go."

He pulled on his jacket, trying not to look at her; the mixture of frailty and appetite scared him. The sweat on her body was fresh; it gathered in the soft

passage behind her clavicles; it streamed on her face.

"Don't let anybody in, OK?"

She nodded, her eyes searing him.

When he'd gone she locked the door behind him and went back to sit on the

Page 370

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

bed. The tears started to come again, freely. Not grief tears, just salt water.

Well, perhaps there was some grief in them: for this rediscovered fragility, and for

the mats who had gone down the stairs.

He was responsible for her present discomfort, she thought. He'd been the

one to seduce her into thinking she could stand on her own two feet. And where had

it brought her; brought them both? To this hothouse cell in the middle of a July

afternoon with so much malice ready to close in on them.

It wasn't love she felt for him. That was too big a burden of feeling to

carry. It was at best infatuation, mingled with that sense of impending loss she

always tasted when close to somebody, as though every moment in his presence she was

internally mourning the time when he would no longer be there.

Below, the door slammed as he stepped into the street. She lay back on the

bed, thinking of the first time they'd made love together. Of how even that most

private act had been overlooked by the European. The thought of Mamoulia, once

begun, was like a snowball on a steep hill. It rolled, gathering speed and size as

it went, until it was monstrous. An avalanche, a whiteout.

For an instant she doubted that she was simply remembering: the feeling was

so clear; so real. Then she had no doubts.

She stood up, the bedsprings creaking. It wasn't memory at all.

He was here.

58

"Flynn?"

"Hello." The voice at the other end of the line was gruff with sleep.

"Who

is this?"

"It's Marty. Have I woken you up?"

"What the hell do you want?"

"I need some help."

There was a long silence at the other end of the phone.

"Are you still there?"

"Yeah. Yeah."

"I need heroin."

The gruffness left the voice; incredulity replaced. it.

"You on it?"

"I need it for a friend." Marty could sense the smile spreading on Flynn's

face. "Can you get me something? Quickly."

"How much?"

"I've got a hundred quid."

"It's not impossible."

"Soon?"

"Yeah. If you like. What time is it now?" The thought of easy money had got

Flynn's mind oiled and ready to go. "One-fifteen? OK." He paused for calculations.

"You come around in about three-quarters of an hour."

That was efficient; unless, as Marty suspected, Flynn was involved with the

market so deeply he had easy access to the stuff: his jacket pocket, for instance.

"I can't guarantee, of course," he said just to keep the desperation simmering. "But I'll do my best. Can't say fairer than that, can I?"

"Thanks," Marty replied. "I appreciate this."

"Just bring the cash, Marty. That's all the appreciation I need."

The phone went dead. Flynn had a knack of getting the last word in.

"Bastard," Marty said to the receiver, and slammed it down. He was shaking slightly;

his nerves were frayed. He slipped into a newsstand, picked up a packet of

cigarettes, and then got back into the car. It was lunchtime; the traffic in the

middle of London would be thick, and it would take the best part of forty-five

minutes to get to the old stamping ground. There was no time to go back and check on

Carys. Besides, he guessed she wouldn't have thanked him for delaying his purchase.

She needed dope more than she needed him.

The European appeared too suddenly for Carys to hold his insinuating presence at

bay. But weak as she felt, she had to fight. And there was something about this

assault that was different from others. Was it that he was more desperate in his

approach this time? The back of her neck felt physically bruised by his entrance.

She rubbed it with a sweating palm.

I found you, he said in her head.

Page 371

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

She looked around the room for a way to drive him out.

No use, he told her.

"Leave us alone."

You've treated me badly, Carys. I should punish you. But I won't; not if you

give me your father. Is that so much to ask? I have a right to him. You know that in

your heart of hearts. He belongs to me.

She knew better than to trust his coaxing tones. If she found Papa, what

would he do then? Leave her to live her life? No; he would take her too, the way

he'd taken Evangeline and Toy and only he knew how many others; to

that tree, to

that Nowhere.

Her eyes came to rest on the small electric cooker in the corner of the room. She got up, her limbs jangling, and walked unsteadily across to it. If the

European had caught wind of her plan, then all the better. He was weak, she could

sense it. Tired and sad; one eye on the sky for kites, his concentration faltering.

But his presence was still distressing enough to muddy her thought processes. Once

she reached the cooker she could hardly think of why she was there. She pressed her

mind into higher gear. Refusal! That was it. The cooker was refusal! She reached out

and turned on one of the two electric rings.

No, Carys, he told her. This isn't wise.

His face appeared in her mind's eye. It was vast, and it blotted out the room around her. She shook her head to rid herself of him, but he wouldn't be

dislodged. There was a second illusion too, besides his face. She felt arms around

her: not a stranglehold, but a sheltering embrace. They rocked her, those arms.

"I don't belong to you," she said, fighting off the urge to succumb to his

cradling. In the back of her head she could hear a song being sung; its

rhythm

matched the soporific rhythm of the rocking. The words weren't English, but Russian.

It was a lullaby, she knew that without understanding the words, and as it ran, and

she listened, it seemed all the hurts she'd felt disappeared. She was a babe-in-arms

again; in his arms. He was rocking her to sleep to this murmured song.

Through the lace of approaching sleep she caught sight of a bright pattern.

Though she couldn't fix its significance, she remembered that it had been important,

this orange spiral that glowed not far from her. But what did it mean? The problem

vexed her, and kept the sleep she wanted at bay. So she opened her eyes a little

wider to work out what the pattern was, once and for all, and so be done with it.

The cooker came into focus in front of her, the ring glowing. The air above

it shimmered. Now she remembered, and the memory thrust sleepiness away. She

stretched out her arm toward the heat.

Don't do this, the voice in her head advised. You'll only hurt yourself.

But she knew better. Slumber in his arms was more dangerous than any pain

the next few moments would bring. The heat was uncomfortable, though her skin was

still inches from its source, and for a desperate moment her willpower faltered.

You'll be scarred for life, the European said, sensing her equivocation.

"Let me alone."

I just don't want to see you hurt, child. I love you too much. The lie was a

spur. She found the vital ounce of courage, raised her hand and pressed it, palm

down, onto the electric ring.

The European screamed first; she heard his voice begin to rise in the

instant before her own cry began. She pulled her hand off the cooker as the smell of

burning hit her. Mamoulia withdrew from her; she felt his retreat. Relief flooded

her system. Then the pain overwhelmed her, and a quick dark came down. She didn't

fear it, though. It was quite safe, that dark. He wasn't in it.

"Gone," she said, and collapsed.

When she came to, less than five minutes later, her first thought was that she was

holding a fistful of razors.

She edged her way across to the bed and put her head on it until she'd fully

regained her consciousness. When she had courage enough, she looked at her hand. The

design of the rings was burned quite clearly onto her palm, a spiral tattoo. She

stood up and went to the sink to run the wound under cold water. The process calmed

the pain somewhat; the damage was not as severe as she had thought. Though it had

seemed an age, her palm had probably only been in direct contact with the ring for a

second or two. She wrapped her hand up in one of Marty's T-shirts. Then she

remembered she'd read somewhere that burns were best left to the open air, and she

undid her handiwork. Exhausted, she lay on the bed and waited for Marty to bring her

Page 372

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

a piece of the Island.

59

The Reverend Bliss' boys stayed in the downstairs back room of the house on Caliban

Street, lost in a reverie of watery death, for well over an hour. In that time

Mamouljian had gone in search of Carys, found her and been driven out again. But he

had discovered her whereabouts. More than that, he had gleaned that Strauss-the man

he had so foolishly ignored at the Sanctuary-had now gone to fetch the girl heroin.

It was time, he thought, to stop being so compassionate.

He felt like a beaten dog: all he wanted to do was to lie down and die.
It

seemed today-especially since the girl's skillful rejection of him-that he
felt

every hour of his long, long life in his sinews. He looked down at his
hand, which

still ached with the burn he'd received through Carys. Perhaps the girl
would

understand, finally, that all of this was inevitable. That the endgame
he was about

to enter was more important than her life or Strauss' or Breer's or
those of the two

idiot Memphisites he'd left dreaming two floors below.

He went down to the first landing and into Breer's room. The Razor-
Eater was

recumbent on his mattress in the corner of the room, his neck akimbo,
his stomach

impaled, gaping up at him like a lunatic fish. At the bottom of the
mattress, drawn

up close because of Breer's failing eyesight, the television gabbled its
inanities.

"We'll be leaving soon," Mamoulian said.

"Did you find her?"

"Yes, I found her. A place called Bright Street. The house-" he seemed
to

find this thought amusing, "is painted yellow. The second floor, I
think."

"Bright Street," said Breer, dreamily. "Shall we go and find her then?"

"No; not we."

Breer turned a little more toward the European; he had braced his broken

neck with a makeshift splint, and it made movement difficult. "I want to see her,"

he said.

"You shouldn't have let her go in the first place."

"He came; the one from the house. I told you."

"Oh, yes," said Mamouliau. "I have plans for Strauss."

"Shall I find him for you?" Breer said. The old images of execution sprang

into his head, as if fresh from a book of atrocities. One or two of them were

sharper than ever, as if they were close to being realized.

"No need," the European replied. "I have two eager acolytes willing to do

that job for me."

Breer sulked. "What can I do, then?"

"You can prepare the house for our departure. I want you to burn what few

possessions we have. I want it to be as though we never existed, you and I."

"The end's near, is it?"

"Now I know where she is, yes."

"She may run off."

"She's too weak. She won't be able to move until Strauss brings her drug.

And of course he'll never do that."

"You're going to have him killed?"

"Him, and anyone who gets in my way from this moment on. I've no energy left

for compassion. That's been my error so often: letting the innocent escape. You've

got your instructions, Anthony. Be about your business."

He withdrew from the fetid room, and went downstairs to his new agents. The

Americans stood respectfully when he opened the door.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

The blond one, who had been the more compliant from the outset, started to

express his undying thanks over again, but Mamoulian silenced him. He gave them

their orders, and they took them as if he were dispensing sweets.

"There are knives in the kitchen," he said. "Take them and use them in good

health."

Chad smiled. "You want us to kill the wife too?"

"The Deluge has no time to be selective."

"Suppose she hasn't sinned?" Tom said, not sure of why he thought this

foolish thought.

"Oh, she's sinned," the man replied, with glittering eyes, and that was good

enough for the Reverend Bliss' boys.

Page 373

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

Upstairs, Breer hoisted himself off his mattress with difficulty, and stumbled into

the bathroom to look at himself in the cracked mirror. His injuries had long ago

stopped seeping, but he looked terrible.

"Shave," he told himself. "And sandalwood."

He was afraid that things were moving too fast now, and if he wasn't careful

he was going to be left out of the calculations. It was time he acted on his own

behalf. He would find a clean shirt, a tie and a jacket and then he would go out

courting. If the endgame was so close that the evidence had to be destroyed, then he

had better be quick. Better finish his romance with the girl before she went the way

of all flesh.

60

It took considerably longer than three-quarters of an hour to cross London. A large

antinuclear march was underway; various sections of the main body were assembling

around the city, then marching toward a mass rally in Hyde Park. The center of the

city, which was at best difficult to navigate, was so thick with marchers and

arrested traffic as to be virtually impassable. None of which Marty had realized

until he was in the thick of it, by which time retreat and rerouting was out of the

question. He cursed his lack of attention: there had surely been police signs

warning incoming motorists of the delay. He had noticed none of them.

There was nothing to be done, however, except perhaps to desert the car and

set out on foot or by subway. Neither option was particularly attractive. The subway

would be packed, and walking in today's blistering heat would be debilitating. He

needed what small reserves of energy he still possessed. He was living on adrenaline

and cigarettes, and had been for too long. He was weak. He only hoped-vain hope-that

the opposition was weaker.

It was the middle of the afternoon by the time he reached Charmaine's place.

He drove around the block, looking for somewhere to park, and eventually found a

space around the corner from the house. His feet were somewhat reluctant; the

abasement ahead wasn't particularly attractive. But Carys was waiting.

The front door was just slightly ajar. He rang the bell nevertheless, and

waited on the pavement, unwilling simply to step into the house. Perhaps they were

upstairs in bed, or taking a cool shower together. The heat was still furious, even

though the afternoon was well advanced.

Down at the end of the street an ice-cream van, playing an off-key version

of "The Blue Danube," appeared and stopped by the curb to await patrons. Marty

glanced toward it. The waltz had already attracted two customers. They drew his

attention for a moment: sober-suited young men whose backs were turned to him. One

of them boasted bright yellow hair: it shone in the sun. They were taking possession

of their ice creams now; money was exchanged. Satisfied, they disappeared around the

corner without looking over their shoulders.

Despairing of an answer to his bell-ringing, Marty pushed the door open. It

grated across the coconut matting, which bore a threadbare "Welcome. " A pamphlet,

stuck halfway through the mailbox, dislodged and fell on the inside, facedown. The

sprung mailbox snapped loudly back into place.

"Flynn? Charmaine?"

His voice was an intrusion; it carried up the stairs, where dust motes thronged the sunlight through the half-landing window; it ran into the kitchen,

where yesterday's milk was curdling on the board beside the sink.

"Is anybody in?"

Standing in the hallway, he heard a fly. It circled his head, and he waved

it off. Unconcerned, it buzzed off down the hallway toward the kitchen, tempted by

something. Marty followed it, calling Charmaine's name as he went.

She was waiting for him in the kitchen, as was Flynn. They had both had

their throats cut.

Charmaine had sunk down against the washing machine. She sat, one leg bent

beneath her, staring at the opposite wall. Flynn had been placed with his head over

the sink as though bending to douse his face. The illusion of life was almost

successful, even to the splashing sound.

Marty stood in the doorway, while the fly, not as finicky as he, flew around

and around the kitchen, ecstatic. Marty just stared. There was nothing to be done:

all that was left was to look. They were dead. And Marty knew without the effort of

thinking about it that the killers were dressed in gray, and had turned that far

corner, ice creams in hand, accompanied by "The Blue Danube."

Page 374

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

They'd called Marty the Dancer of Wandsworth-those who'd called him anything

at all-because Strauss was the Waltz King. He wondered if he'd ever told Charmaine

that, in any of his letters. No, he probably hadn't: and now it was too late. Tears

had begun to sting the rims of his eyes. He fought them back. They would interrupt

the view, and he hadn't finished looking yet.

The fly who'd brought him here was circling close to his head again.

"The European," he murmured to it. "He sent them."

The fly zigzagged, excitedly. "Of course," it buzzed.

"I'll kill him."

The fly laughed. "You don't have any idea what he is. He could be the Devil

himself."

"Fucking fly. What do you know?"

"Don't get so grand with me," the fly replied. "You're a shit-walker, same

as I am."

He watched it rove, looking for a place to put its dirty feet. It landed,
at

last, on Charmaine's face. Atrocious that she didn't raise a lazy hand to
swat it

away; terrible that she just sprawled there, leg bent, neck slit, and let
it crawl

on her cheek, up to her eye, down to her nostril, supping here and
there, careless.

The fly was right. He was ignorant. If they were to survive, he had to
root

out Mamouljian's secret life, because that knowledge was power. Carys
had been wise

all along. There was no closing your eyes and turning your back on
the European. The

only way to be free of him was to know him; to look at him for as long
as courage

allowed and see him in every ghastly particular.

He left the lovers in the kitchen and went to look for the heroin. He
didn't

have to search far. The packet was in the inside of Flynn's jacket,
which was

casually thrown over the sofa in the front room. Pocketing the fix
Marty went to the

front door, aware that stepping out of this house into the open
sunlight was

tantamount to inviting a murder charge. He would be seen and easily
recognized: the

police would be after him-in hours. But there was no help for it;
escaping by the

back door would look every bit as suspicious.

At the door he stooped and snatched up the pamphlet that had slid from the

letterbox. It bore the smiling face of an evangelist, one Reverend Bliss, who was

standing, microphone in hand, raising his eyes to Heaven. "Join the Crowd," the

banner proclaimed, "and Feel the Power of God in Operation. Hear the Words! Feel the

Spirit!" He pocketed it for future reference.

On his way back to Kilburn he stopped at a telephone box and reported the

murders. When they asked him who he was he told them, admitting that he was a parole

jumper to boot. When they told him to turn himself in to the nearest police station,

he replied that he would, but first he had to attend to some personal business.

As he drove back to Kilburn through streets now littered with the aftermath

of the march, his mind turned over every possible lead to Whitehead's whereabouts.

Wherever the old man was, there, sooner or later, Mamoulia would be. He could try

to get Carys to find her father of course. But he had another request to make of

her, one that it might take more than gentle persuasion to get her to concede to. He

would have to locate the old man by his own ingenuity.

It was only as he drove back, and caught sight of a signpost to Holborn,

that he remembered Mr. Halifax and the strawberries.

61

Marty smelled Carys as soon as he opened the door, but for a few seconds he mistook

the scent for pork cooking. Only when he crossed to the bed did he see the burn on

her open hand.

"I'm all right," she told him very coolly.

"He's been here."

She nodded. "But he's gone now."

"Didn't he leave me any messages?" he asked, with a crooked smile.

She sat up. Something was horribly wrong with him. His voice was odd; his

face was the color of fishmeat. He stood off from her, as if the merest touch would

shatter him. Looking at him made her almost forget the appetite that still consumed

her.

"Message," she said, "for you?" She didn't understand. "Why? What's happened?"

"They were dead."

"Who?"

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"Flynn. Charmaine. Somebody slit their throats."

His face came within an ace of crumpling up. This was the nadir, surely.

They had no further to fall.

"Oh, Marty . . ."

"He knew I was going back to my house," he said. She looked for accusation

in his voice, but there was none. She defended herself nevertheless.

"It couldn't have been me. I don't even know where you live."

"Oh, but he does. I'm sure he makes it his business to know everything."

"Why kill them? I don't see why."

"Mistaken identity."

"Breer knows who you are."

"It wasn't Breer who did it."

"You saw who?"

"I think so. Two kids." He fished for the pamphlet he'd found behind the

door. The assassins had delivered it, he guessed. Something about their sober suits,

and that glimpsed halo of blond hair, suggested doorstep evangelists, fresh-faced

and lethal. Wouldn't the European delight in such a paradox?

"They made an error," he said, slipping off his jacket and starting to

unbutton his sweat-soaked shirt. "They just went into the house and murdered the

first man and woman they met. Only it wasn't me, it was Flynn. " He pulled his shirt

out of his trousers and slung it off. "It's so easy, isn't it? He doesn't care about

the law-he thinks he's above all that." Marty was forcibly aware of how ironic this

was. He, the ex-con, the despiser of uniforms, cleaving to the notion of law. It

wasn't a pretty refuge, but it was the best he'd got at the moment. "What is he,

Carys? What makes him so certain he's immune?"

She was staring down at the fervent face of the Reverend Bliss. "Baptism in

the Holy Ghost!" he promised, blithely.

"What does it matter what he is?" she said.

"Otherwise it's over."

She made no reply. He went to the sink and washed his face and chest in cold

water. As far as the European was concerned, they were like sheep in a pen. Not just

in this room, in any room. Wherever they hid he'd find their refuge in time, and

come. There might be a small struggle-do sheep fight the oncoming execution? he

wondered. He should have asked the fly. The fly would have known.

He turned from the sink, water dripping from his jawline, to look at Carys.

She was staring at the floor, scratching herself.

"Go to him," he said without warning.

He'd tried a dozen ways to open this conversation as he drove back, but why

try to sweeten the pill?

She looked up at him, empty-eyed. "What did you say?"

"Go to him, Carys. Go into him, the way he goes into you. Reverse the procedure."

She almost laughed; there was a sneer mustering in reply to this obscenity.

"Into him?" she said.

"Yes."

"You're insane."

"We can't fight what we don't know. And we can't know unless we look. You

can do that; you can do it for both of us." He started across the room toward her,

but she bowed her head again. "Find out what he is. Find a weakness, a hint of a

weakness, anything that can help us survive."

"No."

"Because if you don't, whatever we try to do, wherever we try to go,

he's

going to come, him or one of his cohorts, and slit my throat the way he did Flynn's.

And you? God knows, I think you'll be wishing you'd died the way I did." This was

brutal stuff, and he felt dirtied by the very saying of it, but he knew how

passionately she'd resist. If bullying didn't work, he still had the heroin. He

squatted on his haunches in front of her, looking up at her.

"Think about it, Carys. Give the idea a chance."

Her face hardened. "You saw his room," she said. "It'd be like locking myself in an asylum."

"He wouldn't even know," he said. "He wouldn't be prepared."

"I'm not going to discuss it. Give me the smack, Marty." He stood up, face

slack. Don't make me cruel, he thought.

"You want me to shoot up, and then wait, is that it?"

Page 376

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"Yes," she said, faintly. Then more strongly: "Yes."

"Is that all you think you're worth?" She didn't reply. Her face was impossible to read. "If you thought that, why'd you burn yourself?"

"I didn't want to go. Not without . . . seeing you again. Being with you."

She was trembling. "We can't win," she said.

"If we can't win, what's to lose?"

"I'm tired," she replied, shaking her head. "Give me the smack. Maybe tomorrow, when I'm feeling better." She looked up at him, eyes shining in the

bruises of her eye sockets. "Just give me the smack!"

"Then you can forget all about it, eh?"

"Marty, don't. It's going to spoil-" She stopped.

"Spoil what? Our last few hours together?"

"I need the dope, Marty."

"That's very convenient. Fuck what happens to me." He suddenly felt this to

be indisputably true; that she didn't care what he suffered and never really had.

He'd run into her life and now, once he'd brought her dope, he could fade out of it

again and leave her to her dreams. He wanted to hit her. He turned his back on her

before he did.

Behind him, she said: "We could have some dope-you too, Marty, why not? Then

we could be together."

He didn't reply for a long moment. When he did he said:

"No fix."

"Marty?"

"No fix until you go to him."

It took Carys several seconds to register the full impact of his blackmail.

Hadn't she said, a long time ago, that he'd disappointed her because she'd expected

a brute? She'd spoken too soon.

"He'll know," she breathed, "he'll know the moment I get near him."

"Tread softly. You can; you know you can. You're clever. You've crept into

my head often enough."

"I can't," she protested. Didn't he understand what he was asking?

He made a face, sighed, and crossed to his jacket, which was where he'd

dropped it on the floor. He rummaged around in the pocket until he found the heroin.

It was a pitifully small packet, and if he knew Flynn, the stuff was cut. But that

was her business, not his. She stared, transfixed, at the packet.

"It's all yours," he said, and threw it over to her. It landed on the bed beside her. "You're welcome to it."

She still stared; now at his empty hand. He broke her look to pick up his

stale shirt, and slip it back on.

"Where are you going?"

"I've seen you high on that crap. I've heard the garbage you talk. I don't

want to remember you like that."

"I have to have it."

She hated him; she looked at him standing in a patch of late-afternoon sun,

with his bare belly and his bare chest, and she hated every fiber of him. The

blackmail she could understand. It was crude, but functional. This desertion was a

worse kind of trick altogether.

"Even if I was to do as you say . . ." she began; the thought seemed to shrink her. ". . . I won't find out anything."

He shrugged. "Look, the smack's yours," he said. "You've got what you wanted."

"And what about you? What do you want?"

"I want to live. And I think this is our only chance."

Even then it was such a slim chance; the slimmest crack in the wall through

which they might, if fate loved them, slip.

She weighed up the options; why she even contemplated his idea she wasn't

certain. On another day she might have said: for love's sake. Finally she said: "You

win."

He sat down and watched her prepare for the journey ahead. First, she washed. Not

just her face, her whole body, standing on a spread towel-at the little sink in the

corner of the room, with the gas-fired water heater roaring as it spat water into

the bowl. Watching her, he got an erection, and he felt ashamed that he should be

thinking of sex when so much was at issue. But that was just the puritan talking; he

Page 377

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

should feel whatever felt right. She'd taught him that.

When she'd finished she put her underwear back on, and a T-shirt. It was

what she'd been wearing when he'd arrived at Caliban Street, he noted: simple

unconfining clothes. She sat on a chair. Her skin rippled with gooseflesh. He wanted

to be forgiven by her; to be told that his manipulation was justified and-whatever

happened from now on-she understood that he'd acted for the best. She offered no

such disclaimer. She just said:

"I think I'm ready."

"What can I do?"

"Very little," she replied. "But be here, Marty."

"And if . . . you know . . . if anything seems to be wrong? Can I help you?"

"No," she answered.

"When will I know that you're there?" he asked.

She looked at him as though his question was an idiot's, and said:

"You'll

know."

62

It wasn't difficult to find the European: her mind went to him with almost

distressing readiness, as if into the arms of a long-lost compatriot. She could

distinctly feel the pull of him, though not, she thought, a conscious magnetism.

When her thoughts arrived at Caliban Street and entered the room at the top of the

stairs, her suspicions about his passivity were verified. He was lying on the bare

boards of the room in a posture of utter exhaustion. Perhaps, she thought, I can do

this after all. Like a teasing mistress, she crept to his side, and slipped into

him.

She murmured.

Marty flinched. There were movements in her throat, which were so thin he

felt he could almost see the words shaping in it. Speak to me, he willed her. Say

it's all right. Her body had become rigid. He touched her. Her muscle

was stone, as

though she'd exchanged glances with the basilisk.

"Carys?"

She murmured again, her throat palpitating, but no words came; there was

barely breath.

"Can you hear me?"

If she could, she made no sign of it. Seconds passed into minutes and still

she was a wall, his questions fracturing against her and falling into silence.

And then she said: "I'm here." Her voice was insubstantial, like a foreign

station found on a radio; words from some unfixable place.

"With him?" he asked.

"Yes."

No prevarication now, he charged himself. She'd gone to the European, as

he'd asked. Now he had to use her courage as efficiently as possible and call her

back before anything went wrong. He asked the most difficult question first, and the

one he most needed an answer to.

"What is he, Carys?"

"I don't know," she said.

The tip of her tongue flickered out to spread a film of spit across her lips.

"So dark," she muttered.

It was dark in him: the same palpable darkness as in the room at Caliban

Street. But, for the moment at least, the shadows were passive. The European didn't

expect intruders here. He'd left no guardian terrors at the gates of his brain. She

stepped deeper into his head. Darts of light burst at the corners of her thought's

sight, like the colors that came after she'd rubbed her eyes, only more brilliant

and more momentary. They came and went so quickly she was not certain if she saw

anything in them or illuminated by them, but as she progressed and the bursts became

more frequent, she began to see patterns there: commas, lattices, bars, dots,

spirals.

Marty's voice interrupted the reverie, some foolish question that she had no

patience with. She ignored it. Let him wait. The lights were becoming more

intricate, their patterns cross-fertilizing, gaining depth and weight. Now she

seemed to see tunnels and tumbling cubes; seas of rolling light; fissures opening

and sealing; rains of white noise. She watched, entranced by the way they grew and

multiplied, the world of his thought appearing in flickering Heavens above her;

Page 378

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

falling in showers on her and about her. Vast blocks of intersecting geometries

thundered over, hovering inches above her skull, the weight of small moons.

Just as suddenly: gone. All of them. Darkness again, as relentless as ever,

pressed on her from every side. For a moment she had the sensation of being

smothered; she grabbed for breath, panicking.

"Carys?"

"I'm all right," she whispered to the distant inquirer. He was a world away,

but he cared for her, or so she dimly remembered.

"Where are you?" he wanted to know.

She didn't have a clue, so she shook her head. Which way should she advance,

if at all? She waited in the darkness, readying herself for whatever might happen

next.

Suddenly the lights began again, at the horizon. This time-for their second

performance-pattern had become form. Instead of spirals she saw
rising columns of

burning smoke. In place of seas of light, a landscape, with intermittent
sunshine

stabbing distant hillsides. Birds rose on burning wings then turned
into leaves of

books, fluttering up from conflagrations that were even now flaring on
every side.

"Where are you?" he asked her again. Her eyes roved maniacally
behind her

closed lids, taking in this burgeoning province. He could share none of
it, except

through her words, and she was dumb with admiration or terror, he
couldn't tell

which.

There was sound here too. Not much; the promontory she walked on
had

suffered too many ravages to shout. Its life was almost out. Bodies
sprawled

underfoot, so badly disfigured they might have been dropped out of
the sky. Weapons;

horses; wheels. She saw all of this as if by a show of lurid fireworks,
with no

sight glimpsed more than once. In the instant of darkness between one
light-burst

and the next the entire scene would change. One moment she was
standing on an open

road with a naked girl running toward her, bawling. The next, on a
hillside looking

down on a razed valley, snatched through a pall of smoke. Now a silver birch copse,

now not. Now a ruin, with a headless man at her feet; again, not. But always the

fires somewhere near; the smuts and the shrieks dirtying the air; the sense of

relentless pursuit. She felt it could go on forever, these scenes changing before

her-one moment a landscape, the next an atrocity-without her having time to

correlate the disparate images.

Then, as abruptly as the first patterns had ceased, the fires did also, and

the darkness was everywhere about her again.

"Where?"

Marty's voice found her. He was so agitated in his confusion, she answered

him.

"I'm almost dead," she said, quite calmly.

"Carys?" He was terrified that naming her would alert Mamouliau, but he had

to know if she spoke for herself, or for him.

"Not Carys," she replied. Her mouth seemed to lose its fullness; the lips thinning. It was Mamouliau's mouth, not hers.

She raised her hand a little way from her lap as if making to touch her face.

"Almost dead," she said again. "Lost the battle, you see. Lost the whole bloody war . . ."

"Which war?"

"Lost from the beginning. Not that it matters, eh? Find myself another war.

There's always one around."

"Who are you?"

She frowned. "What's it to you?" she snapped at him. "None of your business."

"It doesn't matter," Marty returned. He feared pushing the interrogation too

hard. As it was, his question was answered in the next breath.

"My name's Mamoulia. I'm a sergeant in the Third Fusiliers. Correction: was

a sergeant."

"Not now?"

"No, not now. I'm nobody now. It's safer to be nobody these days, don't you

think?"

The tone was eerily conversational, as though the European knew exactly what

was happening, and had chosen to talk with Marty through Carys. Another game,

perhaps?

"When I think of the things I've done," he said, "to stay out of trouble.

I'm such a coward, you see? Always have been. Loathe the sight of blood." He began

to laugh in her, a solid, unfeminine laugh.

"You're just a man?" Marty said. He could scarcely credit what he was being

told. There was no Devil hiding in the European's cortex, just this half-mad

sergeant, lost on some battlefield. "Just a man?" he said again.

"What did you want me to be?" the sergeant replied, quick as a flash. "I'm

happy to oblige. Anything to get me out of this shit."

"Who do you think you're talking to?"

The sergeant frowned with Carys' face, puzzling this one out.

"I'm losing my mind," he said dolefully. "I've been talking to myself for days now on and off. There's no one left, you see? The Third's been wiped out. And

the Fourth. And the Fifth. All blown to Hell!" He stopped and pulled a wry face.

"Got no one to play cards with, damn it. Can't play with dead men, can I? They've

got nothing I want . . ." The voice trailed away.

"What date is it?"

"Sometime in October, isn't it?" the sergeant came back. "I've lost track of

time. Still, it's fucking cold at night, I tell you that much. Yes, must be October

at least. There was snow in the wind yesterday. Or was it the day before?"

"What year is it?"

The sergeant laughed. "I'm not that far gone," he said. "It's 1811. That's right. I'm thirty-two on the ninth of November. And I don't look a day over forty."

It was 1811. If the sergeant was answering truthfully that made Mamouliau

two centuries old.

"Are you sure?" Marty asked. "The year is 1811; you're certain?"

"Shut your mouth!" the answer came.

"What?"

"Trouble."

Carys had drawn her arms up against her chest, as though constricted. She

felt enclosed-but by what she wasn't certain. The open road she'd been standing on

had abruptly disappeared, and now she sensed herself lying down, in darkness. It was

warmer here than it had been on the road, but not a pleasant heat. It smelled

putrid. She spat, not once but three or four times, to rid herself of a mouthful of

muck. Where was she, for God's sake?

Close by she could hear the approach of horses. The sound was muffled, but

it made her, or rather the man she occupied, panic. Off to her right, somebody

moaned.

"Ssh . . ." she hissed. Didn't the moaner hear the horses too? They'd be discovered; and though she didn't know why, she was certain discovery would prove

fatal.

"What's happening?" Marty asked.

She didn't dare reply. The horsemen were too close to dare a word. She could

hear them dismounting and approaching her hiding place. She repeated a prayer,

soundlessly. The riders were talking now; they were soldiers, she guessed. An

argument had erupted among them as to who would tackle some distasteful duty. Maybe,

she prayed, they'd give up their search before they started. But no. The debate was

over, and they were grunting and complaining as several set about their labors. She

heard them moving sacks, and flinging them down. A dozen; two dozen. Light seeped

through to where she lay, scarcely breathing. More sacks were moved; more light fell

on her. She opened her eyes, and finally recognized what refuge the sergeant had

chosen.

"God Almighty," she said.

They weren't sacks she lay among, but bodies. He had hidden himself in a

mound of corpses. It was the heat of putrefaction that made her sweat.

Now the hillock was being taken apart by the horsemen, who were pricking

each of the bodies as they were hauled from the heap, in order to distinguish living

from dead. The few who still breathed were pointed out to the officer. He dismissed

them all as past the point of no return; they were swiftly dispatched. Before a

bayonet could pierce his hide, the sergeant rolled over and showed himself.

"I surrender," he said. They jabbed him through the shoulder anyway. He

yelled. Carys too.

Marty reached to touch her; her face was scrawled with pain. But he thought

better of interfering at what was clearly a vital juncture: it might do more harm

than good.

Page 380

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"Well, well," said the officer, high on the horse. "You don't look very dead

to me."

"I was practicing," the sergeant replied. His wit earned him a second jab.

To judge by the looks of the men who surrounded him, he'd be lucky to avoid a

disemboweling. They were ready for some sport.

"You're not going to die," the officer said, patting his mount's gleaming

neck. The presence of so much decay made the thoroughbred uneasy.

"We need answers

to some questions first. Then you can have your place in the pit.

Behind the officer's plumed head the sky had darkened. Even as he spoke the

scene began to lose coherence, as though Mamoulia had forgotten how it went from

here.

Under her lids Carys' eyes began to twitch back and forth again.

Another

welter of impressions had overtaken her, each moment delineated with absolute

precision, but all coming too fast for her to make any sense of.

"Carys? Are you all right?"

"Yes, yes," she said breathlessly. "Just moments . . . living moments."

She saw a room, a chair. Felt a kiss, a slap. Pain; relief; pain again.

Questions; laughter. She couldn't be certain, but she guessed that under pressure

the sergeant was telling the enemy everything they wanted to know

and more. Days

passed in a heartbeat. She let them run through her fingers, sensing that the

European's dreaming head was moving with mounting velocity toward some critical

event. It was best to let him lead the way; he knew better than she the significance

of this descent.

The journey finished with shocking suddenness.

A sky the color of cold iron opened above her head. Snow drifted from it, a

lazy fall of goosedown, which instead of warming her made her bones ache. In the

claustrophobic one-room flat, with Marty sitting bare-chested and sweating opposite

her, Carys' teeth began to chatter.

The sergeant's captors were done with their interrogation, it seemed. They

had led him and five other ragged prisoners out into a small quadrangle. He looked

around. This was a monastery, or had been until its occupation. One or two monks

stood in the shelter of the cloister walkway and watched events in the yard unfold

with philosophical gaze.

The six prisoners waited in a line while the snow fell. They were not bound.

There was nowhere in this bound. There was nowhere in this square for them to run

to. The sergeant, on the end of the line, chewed his nails and tried to keep his

thoughts light. They were going to die here, that was an unavoidable fact. They were

not the first to be executed this afternoon. Along one wall, arranged neatly for

posthumous inspection, lay five dead men. Their lopped heads had been placed, the

ultimate defamation, at their groins. Open-eyed, as if startled by the killing

stroke, they stared at the snow as it descended, at the windows, at the one tree

that was planted in a square of soil among the stones. In summer, it surely bore

fruit; birds made idiot song in it. Now, it was leafless.

"They're going to kill us," she said matter-of-factly.

It was all very informal. The presiding officer, a fur coat pulled around

his shoulders, was standing with his hands at a blazing brazier, his back to the

prisoners. The executioner was with him, his bloody sword jauntily leaned on his

shoulder. A fat, lumbering man, he laughed at some joke the officer made and downed

a cup of something warming before turning back to his business.

Carys smiled.

"What's happening now?"

She said nothing; her eyes were on the man who was going to kill them; she

smiled on.

"Carys. What's happening?"

The soldiers had come along the line, and pushed them to the ground in the

middle of the square. Carys had bowed her head, to expose the nape of her neck.

"We're going to die," she whispered to her distant confidant.

At the far end of the line the executioner raised his sword and brought it

down with one professional stroke. The prisoner's head seemed to leap from the neck,

pushed forward by a geyser of blood. It was lurid against the gray walls, the white

snow. The head fell face-forward, rolled a little way and stopped. The body curled

to the ground. Out of the corner of his eye Mamouljian watched the proceedings,

trying to stop his teeth, from chattering. He wasn't afraid, and didn't want them to

think he was. The next man in line had started to scream. Two soldiers stepped

Page 381

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

forward at the officer's barked command and seized the man.

Suddenly, after a calm

in which you could hear the snow pat the ground, the line erupted with pleas and

prayers; the man's terror had opened a floodgate. The sergeant said nothing. They

were lucky to be dying in such style, he thought: the sword was for aristocrats and

officers. But the tree was not yet tall enough to hang a man from. He watched the

sword fall a second time, wondering if the tongue still wagged after death, sitting

in the draining palate of the dead man's head.

"I'm not afraid," he said. "What's the use of fear? You can't buy it or sell

it, you can't make love to it. You can't even wear it if they strip off your shirt

and you're cold."

A third prisoner's head rolled in the snow; and a fourth. A soldier laughed.

The blood steamed. Its meaty smell was appetizing to a man who hadn't been fed for a

week.

"I'm not losing anything," he said in lieu of prayer. "I've had a useless life. If it ends here, so what?"

The prisoner at his left was young; no more than fifteen. A drummer-boy, the

sergeant guessed. He was quietly crying.

"Look over there," Mamouliau said. "Desertion if ever I saw it."

He nodded toward the sprawled bodies, which were already being vacated by

their various parasites. Fleas and nits, aware that their host had ceased, crawled

and leaped from head and hem, eager to find new residence before the cold caught

them.

The boy looked and smiled. The spectacle diverted him in the moment it took

for the executioner to position himself and deliver the killing stroke. The head

sprang; heat escaped onto the sergeant's chest.

Idly, Mamouliau looked around at the executioner. He was slightly

blood-spattered; otherwise his profession was not written upon him. It was a stupid

face, with a shabby beard that needed trimming, and round, parboiled eyes. Shall I

be murdered by this? the sergeant thought; well, I'm not ashamed. He spread his arms

to either side of his body, the universal gesture of submission, and bowed his head.

Somebody pulled at his shirt to expose his neck.

He waited. A noise like a shot sounded in his head. He opened his eyes,

expecting to see the snow approaching as his head leaped from his neck; but no. In

the middle of the square one of the soldiers was falling to his knees,
his chest

blown open by a shot from one of the upper cloister windows.
Mamoulia glanced

behind him. Soldiers were swarming from every side of the
quadrangle; shots sliced

the snow. The presiding officer, wounded, fell clumsily against the
brazier, and his

fur coat caught fire. Trapped beneath the tree, two soldiers were
mowed down,

slumping together like lovers under the branches.

"Away." Carys whispered the imperative with his voice: "Quickly.
Away."

He belly-crawled across the frozen stone as the factions fought above
his

head, scarcely able to believe that he'd been spared. Nobody gave him
a second

glance. Unarmed and skeletal-thin, he was no danger to anyone. Once
out of the

square, and into the backwaters of the monastery, he took a breath.
Smoke had

started to drift along the icy corridors. Inevitably, the place was being
put to the

torch by one side or the other: perhaps both. They were all imbeciles:
he loved none

of them. He began his way through the maze of the building, hoping
to find his way

out without encountering any stray fusiliers.

In a passageway far from the skirmishes he heard footsteps-sandaled,
not

booted-coming after him. He turned to face his pursuer. It was a
monk, his scrawny

features every inch the ascetic's. He arrested the sergeant by the
tattered collar

of his shirt.

"You're God-given," he said. He was breathless, but his grip was fierce.

"Let me alone. I want to get out."

"The fighting's spreading through the building; it's not safe anywhere."

"I'll take the risk." The sergeant grinned.

"You were chosen, soldier," the monk replied, still holding on. "Chance
stepped in on your behalf. The innocent boy at your side died, but you
survived.

Don't you see? Ask yourself why."

He tried to push the shaveling away; the mixture of incense and stale
sweat

was vile. But the man held fast, speaking hurriedly: "There are secret
tunnels

beneath the cells. We can slip away without being slaughtered."

Yes?"

"Certainly. If you'll help me."

Page 382

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"How?"

"I've got writings to salvage; a life's work. I need your muscle, soldier.

Don't fret yourself, you'll get something in return."

"What have you got that I'd want?" the sergeant said. What could this wild-eyed flagellant possibly possess?

"I need an acolyte," the monk said. "Someone to give my learning to."

"Spare me your spiritual guidance."

"I can teach you so much. How to live forever, if that's what you want."

Mamouljian had started to laugh, but the monk went on with his dreamtalk. "How to

take life from other people, and have it for yourself. Or if you like, give it to

the dead to resurrect them."

"Never. "

"It's old wisdom," the monk said. "But I've found it again, written out in

plain Greek. Secrets that were ancient when the hills were young. Such secrets."

"If you can do all that, why aren't you tsar of all the Russians?" Mamouljian

replied.

The monk let go of his shirt, and looked at the soldier with contempt

freshly squeezed from his eyes. "What man," he said slowly, "what man with true

ambition in his soul would want to be merely tsar?"

The reply wiped the soldier's smile away. Strange words, whose

significance-had he been asked-he would have had difficulty explaining. But there

was a promise in them that his confusion couldn't rob them of. Well, he thought,

maybe this is the way wisdom comes; and the sword didn't fall on me, did it?

"Show me the way," he said.

Carys smiled: a small but radiant smile. In the space of a wing-beat winter melted

away. Spring blossomed, the ground was green everywhere, especially over the burial

pits.

"Where are you going?" Marty asked her. It was clear from her delighted

expression that circumstances had changed. For several minutes she had spat out

clues to the life she was sharing in the European's head. Marty had barely grasped

the gist of what was going on. He hoped she would be able to furnish the details

later. What country this was; what war.

Suddenly, she said: "I'm finished." Her voice was light; almost playful.

"Carys?"

"Who's Carys? Never heard of him. Probably dead. They're all dead but me."

"What have you finished?"

"Learning, of course. All he can teach me. And it was true. Everything he

promised: all true. Old wisdom."

"What have you learned?"

She raised her hand, the burned one, and spread it. "I can steal life," she

said. "Easily. Just find the place, and drink. Easy to take; easy to give."

"Give?"

"For a while. As long as it suits me." She extended a finger: God to Adam.

"Let there be life."

He began to laugh in her again.

"And the monk?"

"What about him?"

"Is he still with you?"

The sergeant shook Carys' head.

"I killed him, when he'd taught me everything he could." Her hands reached

out and strangled the air. "I just throttled him one night, when he was sleeping. Of

course he woke when he felt my grip around his throat. But he didn't struggle; he

didn't make the slightest attempt to save himself." The sergeant was leering as he

described the act. "He just let me murder him. I could scarcely believe my luck; I'd

been planning the thing for weeks, terrified that he'd read my thoughts. When he

went so easily, I was ecstatic-" The leer suddenly vanished. "Stupid," he murmured

in her throat. "So, so stupid."

"Why?"

"I didn't see the trap he'd set. Didn't see how he'd planned it all along,

nurtured me like a son knowing that I'd be his executioner when the time came. I

never realized-not once-that I was just his tool. He wanted to die. He wanted to

pass his wisdom"-the word was pronounced derisively-"along to me, and then have me

put an end to him."

Page 383

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"Why did he want to die?"

"Don't you see how terrible it is to live when everything around you

perishes? And the more the years pass the more the. thought of death freezes your

bowels, because the longer you avoid it the worse you imagine it must be? And you

start to long-oh, how you long-for someone to take pity on you, someone to embrace

you and share your terrors. And, at the end, someone to go into the dark with you."

"And you chose Whitehead," Marty said, almost beneath his breath,
"the way

you were chosen; by chance."

"Everything is chance; and so nothing is," the sleeping man
pronounced; then

laughed again, at his own expense, bitterly. "Yes, I chose him, with a
game of

cards. And then I made a bargain with him."

"But he cheated you."

Carys nodded her head, very slowly, her hand inscribing a circle on
the air.

"Round and round," she said. "Round and round."

"What will you do now?"

"Find the pilgrim. Wherever he is, find him! Take him with me. I
swear won't

let him escape me. I'll take him, and show him."

"Show him what?"

No answer came. In its place, she sighed, stretching a little, and
moving

her head from left to right and back again. With a shock of
recognition Marty

realized that he was still watching her repeat Mamoulia's
movements: that ail the

time the European had been asleep, and now, his energies repleted, he
was preparing

to wake. He snapped his previous question out again, determined to
have an answer to

his last, vital inquiry.

"Show him what?"

"Hell," Mamouljian said. "He cheated me! He squandered all my teachings, all

my knowledge, threw it away for greed's sake, for power's sake, for the life of the

body. Appetite! All gone for appetite. All my precious love, wasted!" Marty could

hear, in his litany, the voice of the puritan-monk's voice, perhaps?-the rage of a

creature who wanted the world purer than it was and lived in torment because it saw

only filth and flesh sweating to make more flesh, more filth. What hope of sanity in

such a place? Except to find a soul to share the torment, a lover to hate the world

with. Whitehead had been such a partner. And now Mamouljian was being true to his

lover's soul: wanting, at the end, to go into death with the only other creature he

had ever trusted. "We'll go to nothing . . ." he breathed, and the breath was a

promise. "All of us, go to nothing. Down! Down!"

He was waking. There was no time left for further questions, however curious

Marty was.

"Carys."

"Down! Down!"

"Carys! Can you hear me? Come out of him! Quickly!"

Her head rolled on her neck.

"Carys!"

She grunted.

"Quickly!"

In Mamoulia's head the patterns had begun again, as enchanting as ever.

Spurts of light that would become pictures in a while, she knew. What would they be

this time? Birds, flowers, trees in blossom. What a wonderland it was.

"Carys."

The voice of someone she had once known was calling her from some very

distant place. But so were the lights. They were resolving themselves even now. She

waited, expectantly, but this time they weren't memories that burst into view-

"Carys! Quickly!"

-they were the real world, appearing as the European opened his lids. Her

body tensed. Marty reached for her hand, and seized it. She exhaled, slowly, the

breath coming out as a thin whine between her teeth, and suddenly she was awake to

her imminent danger. She flung her thought out of the European's

head and back

across the miles to Kilburn. For an agonized instant she felt her will falter, and

she was falling backward, back into his waiting head. Terrified, she gasped like a

stranded fish while her mind fought for propulsion.

Marty dragged her to a standing position, but her legs buckled. He held her

up with his arms wrapped around her.

"Don't leave me," he whispered into her hair. "Gentle God, don't leave me."

Suddenly, her eyes flickered open.

Page 384

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"Marty," she mumbled. "Marty."

It was her: he knew her look too well for the European to deceive him.

"You came back," he said.

They didn't speak for several minutes, simply held on to each other. When they did

talk, she had no taste for retelling what she'd experienced. Marty held his

curiosity in check. It was enough to know they had no Devil on their backs.

Just old humanity, cheated of love, and ready to pull down the world on its

head.

So perhaps they had a chance of life after all. Mamouliau was a man, for all his

unnatural faculties. He was two hundred years old, perhaps, but what were a few

years between friends?

The priority now was to find Papa and warn him of what Mamouliau intended,

then plan as best they could against the European's offensive. If Whitehead wouldn't

help, that was his prerogative. At least Marty would have tried, for old times'

sake. And in the light of the murder of Charmaine and Flynn, Whitehead's crimes

against Marty diminished to sins of discourtesy. He was easily the lesser of two

evils.

As to the how of finding Whitehead, the only lead Marty had was the strawberries. It had been Pearl who'd told him that Old Man Whitehead had never let

a day go by without strawberries. Not in twenty years, she'd claimed. Wasn't it

possible, then, that he'd continued to indulge himself, even in hiding? It was a

slender line of inquiry. But appetite, as Marty had so recently learned, was at the

crux of this conundrum.

He tried to persuade Carys to come with him, but she was wrung out to the

point of collapse. Her journeys, she said, were over; she'd seen too much for one

day. All she wanted now was the sunshine island, and on that point she would not be

moved. Reluctantly, Marty left her to her fix, and went off to discuss strawberries

with Mr. Halifax of Holborn.

Left alone, Carys found forgetfulness very quickly. The sights she had witnessed in Mamoulia's head were dismissed to the dim past from which they'd come.

The future, if there was to be one, was ignored here, where there was only

tranquility. She bathed under a sun of nonsenses, while outside a soft rain began.

XII

The Fat Man Dances

64

Breer didn't mind the change in the weather. It was altogether too sultry on the

street, and the rain, with its symbolic cleansing, made him feel more comfortable.

Though it was many weeks since he'd felt the least spasm of pain, he did itch in the

heat. Not even an itch really. It was a more fundamental irritation: a crawling

sensation on or beneath his skin that no ointment allayed. The drizzle seemed to

subdue it a measure, however, for which he was grateful. Either the rain, or the

fact that he was going to see the woman he loved. Though Carys had attacked him

several times (he wore the wounds like trophies) he forgave her her trespasses. She

understood him better than anyone else. She was unique-a goddess, despite her body

hair-and he knew that if he could only see her again, display himself for her, touch

her, all would be well.

But first he had to get to the house. It had taken him a while to find a

taxi that would stop for him, and when one obliged the driver only took him part of

the way before telling him to get out because, he claimed, the smell was so

repulsive he wouldn't be able to get another fare all day. Shamed by this

all-too-public rejection-the taxi driver harangued him from his cab as he drove

away-Breer took to the back streets, where he hoped he wouldn't be sneered and

sniggered at.

It was in one such backwater, just a few minutes' walk from where Carys was

waiting for him, that a young man with blue swallows tattooed on his

neck stepped

out of a doorway to offer the Razor-Eater some assistance.

"Hey, man. You look sick, you know that? Let me lend you a hand."

"No, no," Breer grunted, hoping the Good Samaritan would leave him alone.

Page 385

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"I'm fine, really."

"But I insist," Swallows said, picking up his pace to overtake Breer, then

standing in the Razor-Eater's way. He glanced up and down the road to check for

witnesses before pushing Breer into the doorway of a bricked-up house.

"You keep your mouth shut, man," he said, whipping out a knife and pressing

it to Breer's bandaged throat, "and you'll be OK. Just empty your pockets. Quick!

Quick!"

Breer made no move to comply. The suddenness of the attack had disoriented

him; and the way the youth had seized his splinted neck had made him giddy. Swallows

pushed the knife a little way into the bandaging to make his point clear. The victim

smelled bad, and the thief wanted the job over and done with as soon as possible.

"Pockets, man! You deaf?" He pushed the knife deeper. The man didn't flinch.

"I'll do it, man," the thief warned, "I'll slit your fucking throat."

"Oh," said Breer, unimpressed. More to quiet the tick than out of fear, he

rummaged in the pocket of his coat and found a handful of possessions. Some coins, a

few peppermints that he'd continued to suck until his saliva supply dried up, and a

bottle of aftershave. He proffered them with faint apology on his rouged face.

"That all you've got?" Swallows was outraged. He tore open Breer's coat.

"Don't," the Razor-Eater suggested.

"Bit hot to be wearing a coat, isn't it?" said the thief. "What are you hiding?"

The buttons gave as he tore at the jacket Breer was wearing beneath his

coat, and now the thief was staring, open-mouthed, at the handles of the knife and

fork that were still buried in the Razor-Eater's abdomen. The stains of dried fluids

that ran from the wounds were only marginally less disgusting than the brown rot

that was spreading down from his armpits and up from his groin. In his panic, the

thief pressed the knife more deeply into Breer's throat.

"Christ, man-"

Anthony, having lost his dignity, his self-esteem, and, did he but know it,

his life-had only his temper left to lose. He reached up and took hold of the

inquiring knife in a greasy palm. The thief relinquished it a moment too late.

Breer, swifter than his bulk suggested, twisted blade and hand back, and broke his

assailant's wrist.

Swallows was seventeen. He had lived, he thought, a full life for a

seventeen-year-old. He'd seen two violent deaths, he'd lost his virginity to his

half-sister-at fourteen, he'd raised whippets, he'd watched snuff movies, he'd taken

every kind of pill he could get his trembling hands on: it had been, he thought, a

busy existence, full of acquired wisdom. But this was new. Nothing like this, ever.

It made his bladder ache.

Breer still had hold of the thief's useless arm.

"Let me go . . . please."

Breer just looked at him, his jacket still swinging open, those bizarre wounds displayed.

"What do you want, man? You're hurting me."

Swallows' jacket was also open. Inside was another weapon, thrust

into a

deep pocket.

"Knife?" Breer said, looking at the handle.

"No, man." Breer reached for it. The youth, eager to oblige, pulled the weapon out and dropped it at Breer's feet. It was a machete. Its blade was stained,

but its edge keen.

"It's yours, man. Go on, take it. Only let go of my arm, man."

"Pick it up. Get down and pick it up," Breer said, releasing the injured wrist. The youth went down onto his haunches and picked the machete up, then handed

it to Breer. The Razor-Eater took it. The tableau, with him standing over his

kneeling victim, blade in hand, meant something to Breer, but he couldn't fix

exactly what. A picture from his book of atrocities, perhaps.

"I could kill you," he observed with some detachment.

The thought had not escaped Swallows. He closed his eyes, and waited. But no

blow came. The man simply said, "Thank you," and walked away.

Kneeling in the doorway, Swallows began to pray. He quite surprised himself

with this show of godliness, reciting by rote the prayers he and Hosanna, his

half-sister, had said together before and after they'd sinned.

He was still praying ten minutes later, when the rain started to come on in

earnest.

Page 386

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

65

It took Breer several minutes of searching along Bright Street before he found the

yellow house. Once he'd located it, he stood outside for several minutes, preparing

himself. She was here: his salvation. He wanted their reunion to be as perfect as he

could make it.

The front door was open. Children were playing on the threshold, having been

driven from their hopscotch and skipping games by the onset of the rain. He edged

past them with caution, anxious that his lumpen feet shouldn't crush a tiny hand.

One particularly fetching child earned a smile from him: she did not return it,

however. He stood in the hallway, trying to remember where the European had told him

Carys was hiding. Second floor, wasn't it?

Carys heard somebody moving about on the landing outside the room, but that passage

of shabby wood and peeling wallpaper lay across unbridgeable straits,

far from her

Island. She was quite safe where she was.

Then somebody outside knocked on the door: a tentative, gentlemanly knock.

She didn't answer at first, but when the knocking came again she said, "Go away."

After several seconds' hesitation, the handle of the door was lightly jiggled.

"Please . . ." she said, as politely as possible, "go away. Marty isn't here."

The handle was rattled again, this time more strongly. She heard soft fingers working at the wood; or was that the slosh of waves on the shore of the

Island? She couldn't find it in her to be frightened or even concerned. It was good

H Marty had brought. Not the best-she'd only had that from Papa-but it took away every fiber of fear.

"You can't come in," she told the would-be intruder. "You'll have to go away

and come back later."

"It's me," the Razor-Eater tried to say. Even through the haze of sunshine

she knew the voice. How could Breer be whispering at the door like this? Her mind

was playing unwelcome tricks.

She sat up on the bed, while the noise of his pressure on the door

increased. Suddenly, tiring of subtlety, he pushed. Once, twice. The lock succumbed

too easily, and he stumbled into the room. It wasn't mind-play after all, he was

here in all his glory.

"Found you," he said, the perfect prince.

He carefully closed the door behind him and presented himself to her. She

looked disbelievingly at him: his broken neck supported by some homemade contraption

of wood and bandages, his shabby clothes. He worked at one of his leather gloves to

take it off, but it wouldn't come.

"I came to see you," he said, the words fractured.

"Yes."

He pulled at the glove. There was a soft, sickly noise. She looked at his

hand. Much of the skin had come off with the glove. He extended this seeping

patchwork to her.

"You have to help me," he told her.

"Are you alone?" she asked him.

"Yes."

That was something at least. Perhaps the European didn't even know he was

here. He'd come courting, to judge by this pathetic attempt at civility. His

dalliance went back to that first encounter in the steam room. She hadn't screamed

or puked, and that had won his undying loyalty.

"Help me," he moaned.

"I can't help you. I don't know how to."

"Let me touch you."

"You're ill."

The hand was still extended. He took a step forward. Did he think she was an

icon of some kind, a talisman that-once touched-cured all sickness?

"Pretty," he said.

The smell of him was overpowering, but her drugged mind idled. She knew it

was important to escape, but how? The door perhaps; the window? Or just ask him to

leave: come again tomorrow?

"Will you go, please?"

Page 387

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"Just touch."

The hand was within inches of her face. Revulsion overcame her, bypassing

the lethargy the Island had induced. She swatted the arm away,

appalled by even the

briefest contact with his flesh. He looked offended.

"You tried to harm me," he reminded her. "So many times. I never harmed you

once."

"You wanted to."

"Him; never me. I want you to be with all my other friends; where nothing

can hurt you."

The hand, which had returned to his side, suddenly darted up and took her by

the neck.

"You'll never leave me," he said.

"You're hurting me, Anthony."

He drew her closer, and bent his head toward her as best he could, given the

condition of his neck. In a patch of skin beneath his right eye she could see

movement. The closer he came the more she saw the fat, white grubs that had been

laid as eggs in his face, and were maturing there, awaiting wings. Did he know he

was a home for maggots? Was it, perhaps, a point of pride to be flyblown? He was

going to kiss her: she had no doubt of that. If he puts his tongue in my mouth, she

half-thought, I'll bite it off. I won't let him do this. Gentle God, I'd rather die.

He put his lips on hers.

"You are unforgivable," said a thin voice.

The door was open.

"Let her go."

The Razor-Eater unhanded Carys, and drew away from her face. She spat to

rinse the kiss off and looked up.

Mamouliau was in the doorway. Behind him stood two well-dressed young men,

one with golden hair, both with winning smiles.

"Unforgivable," the European said again, and turned his vacant gaze to

Carys. "You see what happens if you desert my custody?" he said. "What horrors

come?"

She didn't respond.

"You're alone, Carys. Your erstwhile protector is dead."

"Marty? Dead?"

"At his house: going out for your heroin."

She was seconds ahead of him, realizing his error. Maybe it gave Marty an

edge on them, if they thought him dead. But it wouldn't be wise to fake tears. She

was no tragic actress. Best to feign disbelief; doubt, at least.

"No," she said. "I don't believe you."

"My own fair hands," said the blond Adonis at the European's back.

"No," she insisted.

"Take it from me," the European said, "he won't be coming back. Trust me in

this at least."

"Trust you?" she murmured. It was almost funny.

"Haven't I just prevented your rape?"

"He's your creature."

"Yes; and he will be punished, depend upon it. Now I trust you will return

my kindness in coming here, by finding your father for me. I will not brook delay of

any kind, Carys. We will go back to Caliban Street and you will find him, or by God,

I will turn you inside out. That is a promise. Saint Thomas will escort you down to

the car."

The brown-haired smile stepped past his blond companion and offered a hand

to Carys.

"I have very little time to waste, girl," Mamoulian said, and the changed

tone of his voice confirmed that claim. "So please: let's be done with this wretched

business."

Tom led Carys down the stairs. When she'd gone the European turned his

attention to the Razor-Eater.

Breer was not afraid of him; he was afraid of no one any longer. The poky

room they faced each other in was hot; he could tell it was hot by the sweat on

Mamouljian's cheeks and upper lip. He, on the other hand, was cool; he was the

coolest man in creation. Nothing would bring fear to him. Mamouljian surely saw that.

"Close the door," the European told the blond boy. "And find something to

bind this man with."

Page 388

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

Breer grinned.

"You disobeyed me," the European said. "I left you to finish the work at

Caliban Street."

"I wanted to see her."

"She's not yours to see. I made a bargain with you, and like all the others,

you break my trust."

"A little game," Breer said.

"No game is little, Anthony."

Have you been with me all this time and not understood that? Every act

carries some weight of significance. Especially play."

"I don't care what you say. All words; just words."

"You are despicable," the European said. Breer's smudged face looked back at

him without a trace of anxiety or contrition. Though the European knew he had

supremacy here, something about Breer's look made him uneasy. In his time Mamoulia

had been served by far viler creatures. Poor Konstantin, for example, whose

postmortem appetites had run to more than kisses. Why then did Breer distress him?

Saint Chad had torn up a selection of clothes; these, with a belt and a tie,

were sufficient for Mamoulia's purposes.

"Tie him to the bed."

Chad could barely bring himself to touch Breer, though at least the man

didn't struggle. He acceded to this punishment game with the same idiot grin still

creasing his face. His skin-beneath Chad's hand-felt insolid, as though under its

taut, glossy surface the muscle had turned to jelly and pus. The saint worked as

efficiently as he could to get the duty done while the prisoner amused himself

watching the flies orbiting his head.

Within three or four minutes Breer was secured hand and foot.
Mamouliau

noded his satisfaction. "That's fine. You may go and join Tom in the car. I'll be

down in a few moments."

Respectfully, Chad withdrew, wiping his hands on his handkerchief as he

went. Breer still watched the flies.

"I have to leave you now," said the European.

"When will you come back?" the Razor-Eater asked.

"Never."

Breer smiled. "I'm free, then," he said.

"You are dead, Anthony," Mamouliau replied.

"What?" Breer's smile began to decay.

"You've been dead since the day I found you hanging from the ceiling.
I

think perhaps somehow you knew I was coming, and you killed yourself to escape me.

But I needed you. So I gave you a little of my life, to keep you in my employ."

Breer's smile had disappeared altogether.

"That's why you're so impervious to pain; you are a walking corpse.
The

deterioration your body should have suffered in these hot months has been held at

bay. Not entirely prevented, I'm afraid, but slowed considerably."

Breer shook his head. Was this the miracle of redemption?

"Now I no longer need you. So I withdraw my gift . . ."

"No!"

He tried to make a small pleading gesture, but his wrists were bound together, and the bindings bit into the muscle, causing it to buckle and furrow like

soft clay.

"Tell me how to make amends," he offered. "Anything."

"There is no way."

"Anything you ask. Please."

"I ask you to suffer," the European replied.

"Why?"

"For treachery. For being, in the end, like the others."

". . . no . . . just a little game . . ."

"Then let this be a game too, if it amuses you. Six months of deterioration

pressed into as many hours."

Mamouliau crossed to the bed, and put his hand on Breer's sobbing mouth,

making something very like a snatching gesture.

"It's over, Anthony," he said.

Breer felt a motion in his lower belly, as though some jittering thing had

suddenly twitched and perished in there. He followed the European's exit with

upturned eyes. Matter, not tears, gathered at their rims.

Page 389

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"Forgive me," he begged his savior. "Please forgive me." But the European

had gone, quietly, closing the door behind him.

There was a brawling on the windowsill. Breer looked from door to window.

Two pigeons had squabbled over some morsel, and were now flying off. Small white

feathers settled on the sill, like midsummer snow.

66

"It is Mr. Halifax, isn't it?"

The man inspecting the boxes of fruit in the breezeless, wasp-woven yard at

the back of the shop turned to Marty.

"Yes. What can I do for you?"

Mr. Halifax had been out sunbathing, and injudiciously. His face was peeling

in places, and looked tender. He was hot and uncomfortable and, Marty guessed, thin

of temper. Tact was the order of the day, if he hoped to win the man's confidence.

"Business OK?" Marty asked.

Halifax shrugged. "It'll do," he said, unwilling to be drawn on the subject.

"Lot of my regular customers are on holiday at this time of year." He peered at

Marty. "Do I know you?"

"Yes. I've been here several times," Marty lied. "For Mr. Whitehead's strawberries. That's what I came for. The usual order."

Halifax registered nothing; he put down the tray of peaches he was holding.

"I'm sorry. I don't supply any Mr. Whitehead."

"Strawberries," Marty prompted.

"I heard what you said," Halifax replied testily, "but I don't know anyone

of that name. You must be mistaken."

"You do remember me?"

"No, I don't. Now if you'd like to make a purchase, Theresa will serve you."

He nodded back in the direction of the shop itself. "I'd like to finish here before

I cook in this bloody heat."

"But I'm supposed to be picking up strawberries."

"You can have as many as you like," Halifax said, spreading his arms.

"There's a glut. Just ask Theresa."

Marty could see failure looming. The man wasn't about to give an inch. He

tried one final tack. "You don't have any fruit set aside for Mr. Whitehead? You

normally have them packed, ready for him."

This significant detail seemed to mellow the dismissal on Halifax's face.

Doubt dawned.

"Look . . ." he said, ". . . I don't think you quite understand . . ." His

voice dropped in volume, though there was nobody else in the yard to hear. "Joe

Whitehead is dead. Don't you read the newspapers?"

A large wasp alighted on Halifax's arm, navigating the ginger hairs with

difficulty. He let it crawl there, undisturbed.

"I don't believe everything I read in the newspapers," Marty replied, quietly. "Do you?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," the other man returned.

"His strawberries," Marty said. "That's all I'm after."

"Mr. Whitehead is dead."

"No, Mr. Halifax; Joe is not dead. You and I both know that."

The wasp rose from Halifax's arm and careered in the air between them. Marty

swatted it away; it came back, its buzz louder.

"Who are you?" Halifax said.

"Mr. Whitehead's bodyguard. I've told you, I've been here before."

Halifax bent back to the tray of peaches; more wasps congregated at a bruise

on one of them. "I'm sorry, I can't help you," he said.

"You took them already, did you?" Marty laid a hand on Halifax's shoulder.

"Did you?"

"I'm not at liberty to tell you anything."

"I'm a friend."

Halifax glanced round at Marty. "I've sworn," he said, with the finality of

a practiced bargainer. Marty had thought the scenario through as far as this

impasse: Halifax confessing that he knew something, but refusing to provide the

details. What now? Did he lay hands on the man; beat it out of him?

"Joe is in great danger."

"Oh, yes," Halifax murmured. "You think I don't realize that?"

Page 390

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"I can help him."

Halifax shook his head. "Mr. Whitehead has been a valued customer for a good

many years," he explained. "He's always had his strawberries from me. I never knew a

man love strawberries the way he does."

"Present tense," Marty commented.

Halifax went on as though he hadn't been interrupted. "He used to come in

here personally, before his lady wife died. Then he stopped coming. He still bought

the fruit. Had somebody come and pick it up for him. And at Christmas, there was

always a check for the kiddies. There still is, come to that. Still sends money for

them."

The wasp had alighted on the back of his hand, where the sweet juice of one

fruit or another had dried. Halifax let it have its fill. Marty liked him. If

Halifax wasn't willing to volunteer the information Marty wouldn't be able to bully

it out of the man.

"Now you come here and tell me you're a friend of his," Halifax said. "How

do I know you're telling the truth? People have friends who'd cut their throats."

"His more than most."

"True. So much money, so few people who care about him." Halifax had a sad

look. "Seems to me I should keep his hideaway secret, don't you? Or else who can he

trust in all the world?"

"Yes," Marty conceded. What Halifax said made perfect and compassionate

sense, and there was nothing he was prepared to do to make him rescind it.

"Thank you," he said, cowed by the lesson. "I'm sorry to have kept you from

your work." He made his way back toward the shop. He'd gone a few paces when Halifax

said: "You were the one."

Marty pivoted on his heel.

"What?"

"You were the one who came for the strawberries. I remember you. Only you

looked different then."

Marty ran his hand across several days' growth of beard; shaving was a

forgotten craft these mornings.

"Not the hair," Halifax said. "You were harder. I didn't take to you."

Marty waited somewhat impatiently for Halifax to finish this farewell

homily. His mind was already turning over other possibilities. It was only when he

turned back into Halifax's words that he realized the man had changed his mind. He

was going to tell. He beckoned Marty back across the yard.

"You think you can help him?"

"Maybe."

"I hope somebody can."

"You've seen him?"

"I'll tell you. He rang the shop, asked for me. Funny, I recognized the voice immediately, even after all these years. He asked me to bring him some

strawberries. He said he couldn't come himself. It was terrible."

"Why?"

"He's so frightened." Halifax hesitated, looking for the right words. "I

remember him as being big, you know? Impressive. He'd come in the shop and everyone

would part for him. Now? Shrunk to nothing. Fear did that to him. I've seen it

happen. My sister-in-law, same thing happened to her. She had cancer. Fear killed

her months before the tumor."

"Where is he?"

"I tell you, I went back home and I didn't say a word to anyone. I just

drank half a bottle of Scotch, straight off. Never done that in my life. I just

wanted to get the way he'd looked out of my head. It really turned my stomach,

hearing him and seeing him that way. I mean-if the likes of him's scared, what

chance have the rest of us got?"

"You're safe," Marty said, hoping to God the European's revenge wouldn't

stretch as far as the old man's strawberry supplier. Halifax was a good man. Marty

found himself holding on to this realization while staring at the round, red face.

Here is goodness. Flaws too, no doubt: sins by the armful perhaps. But the good was

worth celebrating, however many stains the man had. Marty wanted to tattoo the date

of this recognition on the palm of his hand.

"There's a hotel," Halifax was saying. "It used to be called the Orpheus,

apparently. It's up the Edgware Road; Staple Corner. Terrible, rundown place.

Waiting for the demolition squad, I shouldn't be surprised."

Page 391

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"He's there alone?"

"Yes." Halifax sighed, thinking of how the mighty had fallen.

"Perhaps," he

suggested after a moment, "you might take him some peaches too?"

He went into the shop and came back with a tattered copy of the London A to Z Street

Atlas. He flicked through the age-creamed pages looking for the appropriate map, all

the while sounding his dismay at this turn of events, and his hope that things might

still turn out well. "Lot of streets been leveled around the hotel," he explained.

"These maps are well out of date, I'm afraid."

Marty peered at the page Halifax had selected. A cloud, bearing the rain

that had already dampened Kilburn and points northwest, covered the sun as Halifax's

stained index finger traced a route across the map from the thoroughfares of Holborn

to the Hotel Pandemonium.

XIII

At the Hotel Pandemonium

67

Hell is reimagined by each generation. Its terrain is surveyed for absurdities and

remade in a fresher mold; its terrors are scrutinized and, if necessary, reinvented

to suit the current climate of atrocity; its architecture is redesigned to appall

the eye of the modern damned. In an earlier age Pandemonium-the first city of

Hell-stood on a lava mountain while lightning tore the clouds above it and beacons

burned on its walls to summon the fallen angels. Now, such spectacle belongs to

Hollywood. Hell stands transposed. No lightning, no pits of fire.

In a wasteland a few hundred yards from a highway overpass it finds a new

incarnation: shabby, degenerate, forsaken. But here, where fumes

thicken the

atmosphere, minor terrors take on a new brutality. Heaven, by night, would have all

the configurations of Hell. No less the Orpheus-hereafter called Pandemonium-Hotel.

It had once been an impressive building, and could have been again if its

owners had been willing to invest in it. But the task of rebuilding and refurbishing

such a large and old-fashioned hotel was probably financially unsound. Sometime in

its past a fire had raged through the place, gutting the first, second and third

floors before being extinguished. The fourth floor, and those above, were

smoke-spoiled, leaving only the vaguest signs of the hotel's former glamor intact.

The vagaries of the city planning department had taken a further toll on the

building's chances of restoration. As Halifax had described, the land to either side

of the hotel had been cleared for some projected redevelopment. None had been

undertaken, however. The hotel stood in splendid isolation, mated about with feed

roads to and from the M1, no more than three hundred yards from one of the busiest

stretches of concrete and tarmac in the south of England. Thousands of drivers

glanced its way every day, but its shabby grandeur was by now so familiar they

probably scarcely registered its existence. Clever, Marty thought, to hide in such

plain sight.

He parked the car as close to the hotel as he could, then slipped in through

a hole in the corrugated iron fencing around the plot, and picked his way across the

wasteland. The instructions on the fence-"No Trespassing" and "No Dumping"-had been

conspicuously ignored. Black plastic bags, bulging with rubbish, were piled in heaps

among the rubble and the old bonfires. Many of the bags had been torn open by

children or dogs. Domestic and manufacturing trash spilled out: hundreds of scraps

of cloth-sweatshop offcuts-were scattered underfoot; rotting food, the ubiquitous

tin can, cushions, lampshades and car engines-all abandoned on a bed of rubble dust

and gray grass.

Some of the dogs-wild, Marty guessed-looked up from their scavenging as he

advanced, their pale flanks dirty, their eyes yellow in the twilight. He thought of

Bella and her gleaming family: these curs hardly seemed of the same species. When he

looked their way they hung their heads and watched him indirectly, like inept spies.

He went up to the main entrance of the hotel: the word ORPHEUS was still

clearly carved above the door; there were mock-Doric columns to either side of the

steps, and fancy tilework on the threshold. But the door itself had boards nailed

across it, and notices warned of swift prosecution if anyone trespassed. There

seemed little chance of that. The second-, third- and fourth-story windows were

boarded up with the same thoroughness as the door; those on the first floor had been

Page 392

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

bricked up entirely. There was a door at the back of the building that was not

boarded up, but it was bolted from the inside. This was probably where Halifax had

entered the building: but Whitehead must have given him access. Without breaking and

entering, there was no way in.

It was only on his second orbit of the hotel that he gave some serious consideration to the fire escape. It zigzagged up the east side of. the building, an

impressive piece of wrought-iron work that was now rusting badly. Further mutilation

had been done to it by some enterprising salvage firm, that, seeing profit in the

scrap metal, had started to cut the escape away from the wall, only to give up on

the job when it had reached the second floor. This left the bottom flight missing,

the escape's truncated tail hanging ten or eleven feet from the ground. Marty

studied the problem. The fire-exit doors on most of the stories had been nailed up;

but one, on the fourth story, showed signs of tampering. Was this how the old man

had gained entrance? He would have needed help, presumably: Luther, perhaps.

Marty scanned the wall beneath the fire escape. It was graffiti-strewn, but

smooth. There was no chance of a handhold or foothold to get him up the first few

feet and onto the steps themselves. He turned to the wasteland, looking for

inspiration, and a few minutes' search in the deepening dusk revealed a pile of

discarded furniture, among it a table, three-legged, but serviceable. He hauled it

back to the fire escape and then wedged a collection of refuse bags beneath it in

lieu of its missing limb. It made an unsteady perch when he climbed up onto it, and

even then his fingers missed the bottom of the escape. He was obliged

to jump for a

handhold, and on the fourth attempt he achieved one, leaving him swinging at arm's

length from the bottom step. A drizzle of rust scales hit his face and hair. The

escape creaked. He mustered his will and hauled himself up a vital few inches, then

struck out with his left hand for a hold on a higher stair. His shoulder joints

complained, but he pulled on upward, hand over hand, until he could lift his leg

high enough to hoist his whole body onto the steps.

The first stage achieved, he stood on the escape and caught his breath, then

started up. The structure was by no means stable; the salvage crew had obviously

been at work loosening it from the wall. Every step he took, a grating squeal seemed

to presage its capitulation.

"Hold on," he whispered to it, mounting the steps with as light a tread as

he could. His efforts were rewarded on the fourth story. As he guessed, the door had

been opened quite recently, and with no small sense of relief he stepped from the

dubious safety of the fire escape and into the hotel itself.

It still stank of the conflagration that had defeated it: the bitter smell

of burned wood and charred carpeting. Below him he could see-by the meager light

through the open fire door-the gutted floors. The walls were scorched, the paint on

the banisters diseased with blisters. But just a few steps up from here the fire's

progress had been arrested.

Marty started up the stairs to the fifth story. A long corridor presented

itself to him, with rooms to right and left. He wandered down the passageway taking

a perfunctory look into each of the suites as he passed. The numbered doors let onto

empty spaces: all the furniture and fittings that were salvageable had been removed

years ago.

Perhaps because of its isolated position, and the difficulty of entering,

the building had not been squatted or vandalized. The rooms were almost absurdly

clean, their deep-pile beige carpets-too bothersome to remove, apparently-springy as

cliff turf beneath his feet. He checked every suite on the fifth floor before

retracing his path to the stairs and going up another flight. The scene was the same

here, although the suites-which had perhaps once commanded a salable view-were

larger and fewer on this floor, the carpets, if anything, lusher. It was bizarre,

ascending from the charred depths of the hotel to this pristine, breathless place.

People had perhaps died in the blindfold corridors below, asphyxiated or baked to

death in their dressing gowns. But up here no trace of the tragedy had intruded.

There was one floor left to investigate. As he climbed the final flight of

stairs the illumination suddenly strengthened until it was almost as bright as day.

The source was highway light, finding its way through the skylights and ineptly

sealed windows. He explored the labyrinthine system of rooms as quickly as possible,

pausing only to glance out of the window. Far below, he could see the car parked

beyond the fence; the dogs engaged in a mass rape. In the second suite he suddenly

caught sight of somebody watching him across the vast reception room only to realize

that the haggard face was his own, reflected in a wall-sized mirror.

Page 393

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

The door of the third suite, on this final floor, was locked, the first

locked suite Marty had encountered. Proof positive, if any were needed, that it had

an occupant.

Jubilant, Marty rapped on the door. "Hello? Mr. Whitehead?" There was no

answering movement from within. He rapped again, harder, casing the door as he did

so to see if a break-in was plausible, but it looked too solid to be easily shouldered down. If necessary, he'd have to go back to the car and get some tools.

"It's Strauss, Mr. Whitehead. It's Marty Strauss. I know you're in there.

Answer me." He listened. When there was no reply, he beat on the door a third time,

this time with fist instead of knuckles. And suddenly the reply came, shockingly

close. The old man was standing just the other side of the door; had been all along

probably.

"Go to Hell," the voice said. It was a little slurred, but unmistakably that

of Whitehead.

"I have to speak to you," Marty replied. "Let me in."

"How the fuck did you find me?" Whitehead demanded. "You bastard."

"I made some inquiries, that's all. If I can find you, anybody can."

"Not if you keep your wretched mouth shut. You want money, is that it? Come

here for money, have you?"

"No."

"You can have it. I'll get it to you, however much you want."

"I don't want money."

"Then you're a damn fool," Whitehead said, and he laughed to himself; a

witless, ragged titter. The man was drunk.

"Mamouljian's on to you," Marty said. "He knows you're alive."

The laughing stopped.

"How?"

"Carys."

"You've seen her?"

"Yes. She's safe."

"Well . . . I underestimated you." He paused; there was a soft sound, as if

he was leaning against the door. After a while he spoke again. He sounded exhausted.

"What did you come for, if not for money? She's got some expensive habits,

you know."

"No thanks to you."

"I'm sure you'll find it as convenient as I did, given time. She'll bend over backward for a fix."

"You're filth, you know that?"

"But you came to warn me anyway." The old man leaped on the paradox with

lightning speed, quick as ever to open a hole in a man's flank. "Poor Marty . . ."

the slurred voice trailed away, smothered by mock pity. Then, razor-sharp: "How did

you find me?"

"The strawberries."

What sounded like muffled choking came from within the suite, but it was

Whitehead laughing again, this time at himself. It took several moments for him to

regain his composure. "Strawberries . . ." he murmured. "My! You must be persuasive.

Did you break his arms?"

"No. He volunteered the information. He didn't want to see you curl up and

die."

"I'm not going to die!" the old man -snapped. "Mamouljian's the one who'll

die. You'll see. He's running out of time. All I have to do is wait. Here's as good

a place as any. I'm very comfortable. Except for Carys. I miss her. Why don't you

send her to me, Marty? Now that would be most welcome."

"You'll never see her again."

Whitehead sighed. "Oh, yes," he said, "she'll be back when she's tired of

you. When she needs someone who really appreciates her stony heart. You'll see. Well

. . . thank you for calling. Goodnight, Marty."

"Wait."

"I said goodnight."

". . . I've got questions . . ." Marty began.

"Questions, questions . . ." the voice was already receding. Marty pressed

closer to the door to offer his final sliver of bait. "We found out who the European

is; what he is!" But there was no reply. He'd lost Whitehead's attention. It was

fruitless anyway, he knew. There was no wisdom to be got here; just a drunken old

Page 394

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

man replaying his old power games. Somewhere deep inside the penthouse suite a door

closed. All contact between the two men was summarily severed.

Marty descended the two flights of stairs back to the open fire door, and

left the building by the route he'd entered. After the smell of dead fire inside,

even the highway-tainted air smelled light and new.

He stood for several minutes on the escape and watched the traffic passing

along the highway, his attention pleasantly diverted by the spectacle of

lane-hopping commuters. Below, two dogs fought among the refuse, bored with rape.

None of them cared, drivers or dogs, about the fall of potentates: why should he?

Whitehead, like the hotel, was a lost cause. He'd done his best to salvage the old

man and failed. Now he and Carys would slip away into a new life, and let Whitehead

make whatever arrangements for cessation he chose. Let him slit his wrists in a

stupor of remorse, or choke on vomit in his sleep: Marty was past caring.

He climbed down the escape and scrambled onto the table, then crossed the

wasteland to the car, glancing back only once to see if Whitehead was watching.

Needless to say, the upper windows were blank.

68

When they got to Caliban Street the girl was still so high on her delayed fix it was

difficult to communicate through her chemically elated senses. The European left the

evangelists to do the cleaning up and burning he'd instructed Breer to do, and

escorted Carys to the room on the top floor. There he set about persuading her to

find her father, and quickly. At first the drug in her just smiled at him. His

frustration began to curdle into anger. When she started to laugh at his

threats-that slow, rootless laughter that was so like the pilgrim's laugh,
as if she

knew some joke about him that she wasn't telling-his control snapped
and he

unleashed a nightmare of such unrestrained viciousness upon her its
crudity

disgusted him almost as much as it terrorized her. She watched in
disbelief as the

same tide of muck that he'd conjured in the bathroom dribbled and
then gushed from

her own body. "Take it away," she told him, but he only increased the
pitch of the

illusion, until her lap squirmed with monstrosities. Abruptly, her drug
bubble

burst. A gleam of insanity crept into her eyes as she cowered in the
corner of the

room, while the things came from her every orifice, struggling to work
their way

out, then clinging to her with whatever limbs his invention had
supplied. She was

within a hairbreadth of madness, but he'd gone too far to withdraw
the assault now,

repelled though he was by its depravity.

"Find the pilgrim," he told her, "and all this vanishes."

"Yes, yes, yes," she pleaded, "whatever you want."

He stood and watched while she obeyed his demands, flinging herself
into

that same fugue state she'd achieved when pursuing Toy. It took her

longer to find

the pilgrim, however, so long that the European began to suspect she'd canceled all

link with her body, and left it to his devices rather than reenter it. But she

finally returned. She had found him at a hotel no less than half an hour's drive

from Caliban Street. Mamoulion was not surprised. It was not in the nature of foxes

to travel far from their natural habitat; Whitehead had simply gone to ground.

Wrung out by the journey and the fear that had propelled her, Carys was

half-carried down the stairs by Chad and Tom and out to the waiting car. The

European made one farewell circuit of the house, to see that any sign of his

presence there had been removed. The girl in the cellar, and Breer's detritus, could

not be cleared at such short notice, but that was a nicety. Let those who came after

construe what they liked from the atrocity photographs on the wall and the bottles

of perfume so lovingly arranged. All that mattered was that evidence of his, the

European's, existence here-or indeed anywhere-be thoroughly effaced. Soon he would

be rumor again; gossip among the haunted people.

"Time to go," he said as he locked the door. "The Deluge is almost upon us."

Now, as they drove, Carys was beginning to find some strength. Balmy air through the

front window caressed her face. She opened her eyes fractionally, and cast them in

the direction of the European. He was not looking her way; he was staring out of the

window, that aristocratic profile of his made blander than ever by fatigue.

She wondered how her father would fare in the approaching endgame. He was

old, but Mamoulion was vastly older; was age, in this confrontation, an advantage or

a disadvantage? Suppose-the thought occurred to her for the first time-they were

equally matched? Suppose the game they were playing ended without defeat or victory

Page 395

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

on either side? Just a twentieth-century conclusion-all ambiguities. She didn't want

that: she wanted finality.

Whichever way it went she knew there was small chance of her survival in the

coming Deluge. Only Marty could tip the balance in her favor, and where was he now?

If he returned to Kilburn and found it deserted, mightn't he assume she'd left him

of her own accord? She couldn't predict the way he'd jump; that he was capable of

the blackmail with the heroin had come as a shock. One desperate maneuver remained a

possibility: to think her way to him and tell him where she was, and why. There were

risks in such a gambit. Catching stray thoughts from him was one thing-it was no

more than a parlor trick-but attempting to push her way into his head and

communicate with him consciously, mind to mind, would require more mental muscle.

Even assuming she had the strength to do it, what would the consequences of such an

intrusion be for Marty? She pondered the dilemma in a daze of anxiety, knowing the

minutes were ticking by, and soon it would be too late for any escape attempt,

however desperate.

Marty was driving south toward Cricklewood when a pain began at the nape of his

neck. It spread rapidly up and over his skull, escalating within two minutes to a

headache of unparalleled proportions. His instinct was to pick up speed and get back

to Kilburn as quickly as possible, but the Finchley Road was heavily trafficked, and

all he could do was edge along with the flow, the pain worsening every ten yards.

His consciousness-increasingly preoccupied with the upward spiral of pain-focused on

smaller and yet smaller bits of information, his perception narrowing to a pinprick.

Ahead of the Citroën the road was a blur. He was almost blinded, and a collision

with a refrigerated meat truck was only prevented by the skill of the other driver.

He realized that driving any further could be fatal, so he edged out of the traffic

as best he could-horns blaring front and behind-and parked, inelegantly, at the side

of the road, then stumbled out of the car to get some air. Completely disoriented,

he stepped straight into the middle of the traffic. The lights of the oncoming

vehicles were a wall of strobing colors. He felt his knees about to buckle and only

prevented himself from collapsing in front of the traffic by hanging on to the open

car door and hauling himself around the front of the Citroën to the

comparative

safety of the pavement.

A single drop of rain fell on his hand. He peered at it, concentrating to

bring it into focus. It was bright red. Blood, he thought dimly. Not rain, blood. He

put his hand up to his face. His nose was bleeding copiously. The heat ran down his

arm and into the rolled sleeve of his shirt. Digging into his pocket he pulled out a

handkerchief and clamped it under his nose, then staggered across the pavement to a

shopfront. In the window, he caught his reflection. Fish swam behind his eyes. He

fought the illusion, but it persisted: brilliantly colored exotica, blowing bubbles

inside his skull. He stood away from the glass, and took in the words painted on it:

Cricklewood Aquarium Supplies. He turned his back on the guppies and the ornamental

carp and sat on the narrow sill. He had begun to shake. This was Mamoulia's doing,

was all he could think. If I give into it, I'll die. I must fight. At all costs,

fight.

Carys spoke, the word escaping her lips before she could prevent it.

"Marty."

The European looked at her. Was she dreaming? There was sweat on

her swollen

lips; yes, she was. Of congress with Strauss, no doubt. That was why she spoke his

name with such demand in her tone.

"Marty."

Yes, for certain, she was dreaming the arrow and the wound. Look how she

trembled. Look how her hands ran between her legs: a shameful display.

"How far now?" he asked Saint Tom, who was consulting the map

"Five minutes," the youth replied.

"Fine night for it," Chad said.

Marty?

He looked up, narrowing his eyes to improve his vision of the street, but he

could not see his interrogator. The voice was in his head.

Marty?

It was Carys' voice, horribly distorted. When it spoke his skull seemed to

creak, his brain blowing up to the size of a melon. The pain was unbearable.

Page 396

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

Marty?

Shut up, he wanted to say, but she wasn't there to tell. Besides, it

wasn't

her, it was him, it, the European. The voice was now replaced by the sound of

somebody's breath, not his own. His was a sickening pant, this was a sleepy rhythm.

The blur of the street was darkening; the ache in his head had become heaven and

earth. He knew if he didn't get help, he'd die.

He stood up, blind. A hissing had filled his ears now, which all but blocked

the din of traffic mere yards from him. He stumbled forward. More blood streamed

from his nose.

"Somebody help me. . ."

An anonymous voice filtered through the chaos in his head. The words it

spoke were incomprehensible to him, but at least he was not alone. A hand was

touching his chest; another was holding his arm. The voice he'd heard was raised in

panic. He wasn't sure if he made any reply to it. He wasn't even sure if he was

standing up or falling down. What did it matter anyway?

Blind and deaf, he waited for some kind person to tell him he could die.

They drew up in the street a short way from the Orpheus Hotel. Mamoulia got out and

left the evangelists to bring Carys. She'd begun to smell, he'd noted; that ripe

smell he associated with menstruation. He strode on ahead, stepping through the rent

fence and onto the no-man's-land that surrounded the hotel. Desolation pleased him.

The heaps of rubble, the piles of abandoned furniture: by the sickly light of the

highway the place had a glamor about it. If last rites were to be performed, what

better place than here? The pilgrim had chosen well.

"This is it?" said Saint Chad, following on.

"It is. Will you find a point of access for us?"

"My pleasure."

"Only do it quietly, if you will."

The young man skipped off across the pit-fraught ground, stopping only to

select a piece of twisted metal from among the rubble to force an entry. So

resourceful, these Americans, Mamoulian mused as he picked his way after Chad: no

wonder they ruled the world. Resourceful, but not subtle. At the front door Chad was

tearing the planks away without much regard for surprise attacks. Can you hear? he

thought to the pilgrim. Do you know I'm down here, so close to you at last?

He turned his cold eyes up to the top of the hotel. His belly was acid with

anticipation; a film of sweat glossed his forehead and palms. I'm like a nervous

lover, he thought. So strange, that the romance should end this way, without a sane

observer to witness the final acts. Who would know, once it was all over; who would

tell? Not the Americans. They would not survive the next few hours with the tatters

of their sanity intact. Not Carys; she would not survive at all. There would be

nobody to report the story, which-for some buried reason-he regretted. Was that what

made him a European? To want to have his story told once more, passed down the line

to another eager listener who would, in his time, disregard its lesson and repeat

his own suffering? Ah, how he loved tradition.

The front door had been beaten open. Saint Chad stood, grinning at his

achievement, sweating in his tie and suit.

"Lead the way," Mamoulia invited him.

The eager youth went inside; the European followed. Carys and Saint Tom

brought up the rear.

Within, the smell was tantalizing. Associations were one of the curses of

age. In this case the perfume of carbonized wood, and the sprawl of wreckage

underfoot, evoked a dozen cities he'd wandered in; but one of course, in particular.

Was that why Joseph had come to this spot: because the scent of smoke and the climb

up the creaking stairs woke memories of that room off Muranowski Square? The thief's

skills had been the equal of his own that night, hadn't they? There'd been something

blessed about the young man with the glittering eyes; the fox who'd shown so little

awe; just sat down at the table willing to risk his life in order to play. Mamoulian

believed the pilgrim had forgotten Warsaw as he'd grown from fortune to fortune; but

this ascent up burned stairs was proof positive that he had not.

They climbed in the dark, Saint Chad going ahead to scout the way, and

calling behind him that the banister was gone in this place and a stair in that.

Between the fourth and fifth stories, where the fire stopped, Mamoulian called a

halt, and waited until Carys and Tom caught up. When they had he instructed that the

girl be brought to him. It was lighter up here. Mamoulian could see a look of loss

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

on the girl's tender face. He touched her, not liking the contact but feeling it

appropriate.

"Your father is here," he told her. She didn't reply; nor did her features relinquish the look of grief. "Carys . . . are you listening?"

She blinked. He assumed he was making some contact with her, if primitive.

"I want you to speak to Papa. Do you understand? I want you to tell him to

open the door for me."

Gently, she shook her head.

"Carys," he chided. "You know better than to refuse me."

"He's dead," she said.

"No," the European replied flatly, "He's up there; a few flights above us."

"I killed him."

What delusion was this? "Who?" he asked sharply. "Killed who?"

"Marty. He doesn't answer. I killed him."

"Shush . . . shush . . ." The cold fingers stroked her cheek. "Is he dead, then? So: he's dead. That's all that can be said."

". . . I did it . . ."

"No, Carys. It wasn't you. It was something that had to be done; don't concern yourself."

He took her wan face in both hands. Often he had cradled her head when she

was a child, proud that she was the pilgrim's fruit. In those embraces he had

nurtured the powers she had grown up with, sensing that a time might come when he

would need her.

"Just open the door, Carys. Tell him you're here, and he'll open it for you."

"I don't want . . . to see him."

"But I do. You'll be doing me a great service. And once it's over, there'll

be nothing to be afraid of ever again. I promise you that."

She seemed to see some sense in this.

"The door . . ." he prompted.

"Yes."

He loosed her face, and she turned away from him to climb the stairs.

In the deep-pile comfort of his suite, his jazz playing on the portable hi-fi he had

personally lugged up six flights, Whitehead had heard nothing. He had all that he

needed. Drink, books, records, strawberries. A man might sit out the Apocalypse up

here and be none the worse for it. He had even brought some pictures: the early

Matisse from the study, Reclining Nude, Quai St. Michel; a Miro and a

Francis Bacon.

The last was a mistake. It was too morbidly suggestive, with its hints of flayed

flesh; he'd turned it to the wall. But the Matisse was a joy, even by candlelight.

He was staring at it, never less than enchanted by its casual facility, when the

knocking came.

He stood up. It was many hours-he'd lost track of time-since Strauss had

been here; had he come again? Somewhat groggy with vodka, Whitehead lurched along

the hall of the suite, and listened at the door.

"Papa . . ."

It was Carys. He didn't answer her. It was suspicious, her being here.

"It's me, Papa, it's me. Are you there?"

Her voice was so tentative; she sounded like a child again. Was it possible

Strauss had taken him at his word, and sent the girl to him, or had she simply come

back of her own accord, the way Evangeline had after cross words? Yes, that was it.

She'd come because, like her mother, she couldn't help but come. He began to unlock

the door, fingers awkward in anticipation.

"Papa . . ."

At last he got the best of the key and the handle and opened the door. She

wasn't there. Nobody was there: or so he thought at first. But even as he stepped

back into the hall of the suite the door was thrown wide and he was flung against

the wall by a youth whose hands seized him at neck and groin and pinned him flat. He

dropped the vodka bottle he was carrying and threw up his hands to signify his

surrender. When he'd shaken the assault from his head he looked over the youth's

shoulder and his bleary eyes came to rest on the man who had followed the youth in.

Quietly, and quite without warning, he began to cry.

They left Carys in the dressing room beside the master bedroom of the suite. It was

Page 398

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

empty but for a fitted wardrobe and a pile of curtains, which had been removed from

the windows and then forgotten. She made a nest in their musty folds and lay down. A

single thought circled in her head: I killed him. She had felt his resistance to her

investigation; felt the tension building in him. And then, nothing.

The suite, which occupied a quarter of the top story, boasted two views. One

was of the highway: a garish ribbon of headlights. The other, that let on to the

east side of the hotel, was gloomier. The small dressing-room window faced this

second view: a stretch of wasteland, then the fence and the city beyond it. But from

her position lying on the floor, all of that was out of sight. All she could see was

a skyfield, across which the blinking lights of a jet crept.

She watched its circling descent, thinking Marty's name.

"Marty. "

They were lifting him into an ambulance. He still felt sick to the pit of

his stomach with the roller coaster he'd been on. He didn't want consciousness,

because with it came the nausea. The hissing had gone from his ears however; and his

sight was intact.

"What happened? Hit-and-run?" somebody asked him.

"He just fell down," a witness replied. "I saw him. Fell down in the middle

of the pavement. I was just coming out of the newsagents when I-"

"Marty."

"-and there he was-"

"Marty. "

His name was sounding in his head, clear as a spring-morning bell. There was

a renewed trickle of blood from his nose, but no pain this time. He raised his hand

to his face to stem the flow but a hand was already there, stanching and wiping.

"You'll be all right," a man's voice said. Somehow Marty felt this to be indisputably true, though it was nothing to do with this man's ministrations. The

pain had gone, and the fear had gone with it. It was Carys speaking in his head. It

had been all along. Now some wall in him had been breached-forcibly perhaps, and

painfully, but the worst was over-and she was thinking his name in her head and he

was catching her thought like a lobbed tennis ball. His previous doubts seemed

naïve. It was a simple act, this thought catching, once you had the knack of it.

She felt him wake to her.

For several seconds she lay on her curtain bed while the jet winked across

the window, not quite daring to believe what her instincts were telling her-that he

was hearing her, that he was alive.

Marty? she thought. This time, instead of the word getting lost in the dark

between his mind and hers, it went unerringly home, welcomed into his cortex. He

didn't have the skill to frame an answer, but that was academic at this

point. As

long as he could hear and understand, he could come.

The hotel, she thought. Do you understand, Marty? I'm with the European at a

hotel. She tried to remember the name she'd glimpsed over the door. Orpheus; that

was it. She had no address, but she did her best to picture the building for him, in

the hope that he could make sense of her impressionist directions.

He sat up in the ambulance.

"Don't worry. The car'll be taken care of," the attendant said, pressing a

hand on his shoulder to get him to lie back down. They'd wrapped a scarlet blanket

across him. Red so the blood doesn't show, he registered as he threw it off.

"You can't get up," the attendant told him. "You're in bad shape."

"I'm fine," Marty insisted, pushing the solicitous hand away. "You've been

wonderful. But I've got a prior engagement."

The driver was closing the double doors at the back of the ambulance.

Through the narrowing gap Marty could see a ring of professional bystanders

straining to catch a final look at the spectacle. He made a dive for the doors.

The spectators were disgruntled to see Lazarus risen, and worse, to see him

smiling like a loon as he emerged, apologizing, from the back of the vehicle. Didn't

the man have any sense of occasion?

"I'm fine," he told the driver as he backed off through the crowd. "Must have been something I ate." The driver stared at him, uncomprehending.

"You're bloody," he managed to mutter.

"Never felt better," Marty replied, and in a way, despite the exhaustion in

Page 399

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

his bones, it was true. She was here, in his head, and there was still time to make

things right, if he hurried.

The Citroen was a few yards down the road; splashes of his blood painted the

pavement beside it. The keys were still in the ignition.

"Wait for me, babe, " he said, and started back toward the Pandemonium

Hotel.

69

It was not the first time Sharon had been locked out of her house while her mother

entertained a man the young girl had never seen before, and would, on past form,

never see again; but tonight the expulsion was particularly

unwelcome. She felt a

summer cold coming on, and she wanted to be in the house in front of the television

instead of out in the street after dark vainly trying to devise new skipping games

for herself. She wandered down the street, beginning a solitary game of hopscotch,

then abandoning it on the fifth square. She was just outside Number Eighty-two. It

was a house her mother had warned her to keep clear of. A family of Asians lived on

the ground floor-sleeping twelve to a bed, or so Mrs. Lennox had told Sharon's

mother-in conditions of criminal squalor. But despite its reputation, Number

Eighty-two had been a disappointment all summer: until today. Today Sharon had seen

peculiar comings and goings at the house. Some people had arrived in a big car and

taken a sick-looking woman away with them. And now, as she idled at the hopscotch

game, there was somebody at one of the middle floor windows, a big, shadowy figure,

and he was beckoning to her.

Sharon was ten. It would be a year before her first period, and though she

had an inkling of the matter between men and women from her half-sister, she thought

it a ridiculous palaver. The boys who played football in the street were

foulmouthed, grubby creatures; she could scarcely imagine ever pining for their

affections.

But the alluring figure at the window was a male, and it found something in

Sharon; it turned over a rock. Beneath were the first stirrings of lives that

weren't quite ready for the sun. They wriggled; they made her thin legs itch. It was

to stop that itch that she disobeyed every prohibition on Number Eighty-two and

slipped into the house when next the front door was opened, and up to where she knew

the stranger to be.

"Hello?" she said, standing on the landing outside the room.

"You can come in," the man said.

Sharon had never smelled death before, but she knew it instinctively:

introductions were superfluous. She stood in the doorway and peered at the man. She

could still run if she wanted to, she knew that too. She was made yet safer by the

fact that he was tied to the bed. This she could see, though the room was dark. Her

inquisitive mind found nothing odd in this; adults played games, the way children

did.

"Put on the light," the man suggested. She reached up for the switch beside

the door and turned it on. The weak bulb lit the prisoner strangely; by it he looked

sicker than anybody Sharon had ever set eyes on. He had obviously dragged the bed

across the room to the window, and in so doing the ropes that tied him had bitten

into his gray skin, so that shiny brown fluids-not quite like blood-covered his

hands and trousers, and spattered the floor at his feet. Black blotches made his

face, which was also shiny, piebald.

"Hello," he said. His voice was warped, as though he was speaking out of a

cheap radio. Its weirdness amused her.

"Hello," she said back.

He gave her a lopsided grin, and the bulb caught the wetness of his eyes,

which were so deep in his head she could scarcely make them out. But when they

moved, as they did now, the skin around them fluttered.

"I'm sorry to call you away from your games," he said.

She dawdled in the door, not quite certain whether to go or stay. "I shouldn't really be here," she teased.

"Oh . . ." he said, rolling his eyes up until all the whites showed.

"Please

don't go."

She thought he looked comical with his jacket all stained and his eyes rolling. "If Marilyn found out I'd been here-"

"Your sister, is that?"

"My mother. She'd hit me."

Page 400

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

The man looked doleful. "She shouldn't do that," he said.

"Well, she does."

"That's shameful," he replied mournfully.

"Oh, she won't find out," Sharon reassured him. The man was more distressed

by her talk of a beating than she'd intended. "Nobody knows I'm here."

"Good," he said. "I wouldn't want any harm to come to you on my account."

"Why are you all tied up?" she inquired. "Is it a game?"

"Yes. That's all it is. Tell me, what's your name?"

"Sharon."

"You're quite right, Sharon; it's a game. Only I don't want to play anymore.

It's started to hurt me. You can see."

He raised his hands as far as he could, to show how the bindings bit. A

diet

of flies, disrupted from their laying, buzzed about his head.

"Are you any good at untying knots?" he asked her.

"Not very."

"Could you try. For me?"

"Suppose so," she said.

"Only I'm feeling very tired. Come in, Sharon. Close the door."

She did as she was told. There was no threat here. Just a mystery (or two

maybe: death and men) and she wanted to know more. Besides, the man was ill: he

could do her no harm in his present condition. The closer she got to him the worse

he looked. His skin was blistering, and there were beads of something like black oil

dotting his face. Beneath the smell of his perfume, which was strong, there was

something bitter. She didn't want to touch him, sorry as she felt for him.

"Please . . ." he said, proffering his bound hands. The flies roved around,

irritated. There were lots of them, and they were all interested in him; in his

eyes, in his ears.

"I should get a doctor," she said. "You're not well."

"No time for that," he insisted. "Just untie me, then I'll find a doctor

myself, and nobody need know you've been up here."

She nodded, seeing the logic of this, and approached him through the cloud

of flies to untie the restraints. Her fingers were not strong, her nails bitten to

the quick, but she worked at the knots with determination, a charming frown flawing

the perfect plane of her brow as she labored. Her efforts were hampered by the flow

of yolky fluid from his broken flesh, which gummed everything up. Once in a while

she'd turn her hazel eyes up to him; he wondered whether she could see degeneration

occurring in front of her. If she could, she was too engrossed in the challenge of

the knots to leave; either that, or she was willingly unleashing him, aware of the

power she wielded in so doing.

Only once did she show any sign of anxiety, when something in his chest

seemed to fail, a piece of internal machinery slipping into a lake around his

bowels. He coughed and exhaled a breath that made sewerage smell like primroses. She

turned her head away and pulled a face. He apologized politely and she asked him not

to do it again, then went back to the problem at hand. He waited patiently, knowing

that any attempt to hurry her along would only spoil her concentration. But in time

she got the measure of the riddle, and the binding began to loosen. His flesh, which

was now the consistency of softened soap, skidded off the bone of his wrists as he

pulled his hands free.

"Thank you," he said. "Thank you. You've been very kind."

He bent to untie the ropes at his feet, his breath, or what passed for it, a

gritty rattle in his chest.

"I'll go now," she said.

"Not yet, Sharon," he replied; speaking was drudgery now. "Please don't go

yet."

"But I have to be home."

The Razor-Eater looked at her creamy face: she looked so fragile, standing

under the light. She had withdrawn from his immediate vicinity once the knots were

untied, as though the initial trepidation had begun again. He tried to smile, to

reassure her that all was well, but his face wouldn't obey. The fat and muscle just

drooped on his skull; his lips felt inept. Words, he knew, were close to failing

him. It would have to be signs from now on. He was moving into a

purser world-one of

symbols, of ritual-a world where Razor-Eaters truly belonged.

His feet were free. In a matter of moments he could be across the room to

where she stood. Even -if she turned and ran he could catch her. No one to see or

Page 401

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

hear; and even if there were what could they punish him with? He was a dead man.

He crossed the room toward her. The little living thing stood in his shadow

and made not the least effort to escape him. Had she too calculated her chances and

seen the futility of a chase? No; she was simply trusting.

He put out a sordid hand to stroke her head. She blinked, and held her breath at his proximity, but made no attempt to evade the contact. He longed for

touch in his fingers, so as to feel her gloss. She was so perfect: what a blessing

it would be to put a piece of her in him, to show as proof of love at the gates of

paradise.

But her look was enough. He would take that with him, and count himself

content; just the somber sweetness of her as a token, like coins in his eyes to pay

his passage with.

"Goodbye," he said, and walked, his gait uneven, to the door. She went ahead

of him and opened the door, then led him down the stairs. A child was crying in one

of the adjacent rooms, the whooping wail of a baby that knows no one will come. On

the front step Breer thanked Sharon again, and they parted. He watched her run off

home.

For his part, he was not certain-at least not consciously-of where he was

going to go now, or why. But once down the steps and onto the pavement his legs took

him in a direction he had never been before, and he didn't become lost, though he

soon made his way into unfamiliar territory. Somebody called him. Him, and his

machete and his blurred, gray face. He went as quickly as anatomy allowed like a man

summoned by history.

70

Whitehead was not afraid to die; he was only afraid that in dying he might discover

that he had not lived enough. That had been his concern as he faced Mamoulia in the

hallway of the penthouse suite, and it still tormented him as they sat in the

lounge, with the buzz of the highway at their backs.

"No more running, Joe," Mamouliau said.

Whitehead said nothing. He collected a large bowl of Halifax's prime

strawberries from the corner of the room, then returned to his chair. Running his

expert fingers across the fruit in the bowl, he selected a particularly appetizing

strawberry and began to nibble at it.

The European watched him, betraying no clue to his thoughts. The chase was

done with; now, before the end, he hoped they'd be able to talk over old times for a

while. But he didn't know where to begin.

"Tell me," Whitehead said, seeking the meat of the fruit right up to the

hull, "did you bring a pack with you?" Mamouliau stared at him.

"Cards, not dogs,"

the old man quipped.

"Of course," the European answered, "always."

"And do these fine boys play?" He gestured to Chad and Tom, who stood by the

window.

"We came for the Deluge," Chad said.

A frown nicked the old man's brow. "What have you been telling them?" he

asked the European.

"It's all their own doing," Mamouliau replied.

"The world's coming to an end," Chad said, combing his hair with obsessive

care and staring out at the highway, his back to the two old men.
"Didn't you know?"

"Is that so?" said Whitehead.

"The unrighteous will be swept away."

The old man put down his bowl of strawberries. "And who will judge?" he

asked.

Chad let his coiffure be. "God in heaven," he said.

"Can't we play for it?" Whitehead responded. Chad turned to look at the

questioner, puzzled; but the inquiry was not for him, but for the European.

"No," Mamouliau replied.

"For old times' sake," Whitehead pressed. "Just a game."

"Your gamesmanship would impress me, Pilgrim, if it weren't so obviously a

delaying tactic."

"You won't play, then?"

Mamouliau's eyes flickered. He almost smiled as he said: "Yes. Of course

I'll play."

"There's a table next door, in the bedroom. Do you want to send one of your

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

bum-boys through to fetch it?"

"Not bum-boys."

"Too old for that, are you?"

"God-fearing men, both of them. Which is more than can be said of you."

"That was always my problem," Whitehead said, conceding the barb with a

grin. This was like the old days: the exchange of ironies, the sweet-sour repartee,

the knowledge, shared every moment they were together, that the words disguised a

depth of feeling that would shame a poet.

"Would you fetch the table?" Mamoulian asked Chad. He didn't move. He had

become too interested in the struggle of wills between these two men. Much of its

significance was lost on him, but the tension in the room was unmistakable.

Something awesome was on the horizon. Maybe a wave; maybe not.

"You go," he told Tom; he was unwilling to take his eyes off the combatants

for a single instant. Tom, happy to have something to take his mind off his doubts,

obliged.

Chad loosened the knot of his tie, which was for him tantamount to nakedness. He grinned flawlessly at Mamouliau.

"You're going to kill him, right?" he said.

"What do you think?" the European replied.

"What is he? The Antichrist?"

Whitehead gurgled with pleasure at the absurdity of this idea. "You've been

telling . . ." he chided the European.

"Is that what he is?" Chad urged, "Tell me. I can take the truth."

"I'm worse than that, boy," Whitehead said.

"Worse?"

"Want a strawberry?" Whitehead picked up the bowl and proffered the fruit.

Chad cast a sideways glance at Mamouliau.

"He hasn't poisoned them," the European reassured him.

"They're fresh. Take them. Go next door and leave us in peace."

Tom had returned with a small bedside table. He set it down in the middle of

the room.

"If you go into the bathroom," Whitehead said, "you'll find a plentiful supply of spirits. Mostly vodka. A little cognac too, I think."

"We don't drink," Tom said.

"Make an exception," Whitehead replied.

"Why not?" said Chad, his mouth bulging with strawberries; there was juice

on his chin. "Why the fuck not? It's the end of the world, right?"

"Right," said Whitehead, nodding. "Now you go away and eat and drink and

play with each other."

Tom stared at Whitehead, who returned a mock-contrite look. "I'm sorry,

aren't you allowed to masturbate either?"

Tom made a noise of disgust and left the room.

"Your colleague's unhappy," Whitehead said to Chad. "Go on, take the rest of

the fruit. Tempt him."

Chad wasn't certain if he was being mocked or not, but he took the bowl and

followed Tom to the door. "You're going to die," he said to Whitehead as a parting

shot. Then he closed the door on the two men.

Mamouljian had laid a pack of cards on the table. This wasn't the

pornographic pack: he'd had that destroyed at Caliban Street, along with his few

books. The cards on the table were older than the other pack by many centuries.

Their faces were hand-colored, the illustrations for the court cards crudely

rendered.

"Must I?" Whitehead asked, picking up on Chad's closing remark.

"Must you what?"

"Die."

"Please, Pilgrim-"

"Joseph. Call me Joseph, the way you used to."

"-spare us both."

"I want to live."

"Of course you do."

"What happened between us-it didn't harm you, did it?"

Mamouljian offered the cards for Whitehead to shuffle and cut: when the offer

was ignored he did the job himself, manipulating the cards with his one good hand.

"Well. Did it?"

Page 403

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"No," the European replied. "No; not really."

"Well then. Why harm me?"

"You misunderstand my motives, Pilgrim. I haven't come here for revenge."

"Why then?"

Mamouljian started to deal the cards for chemin de fer.

"To finish our bargain, of course. Is that so difficult to grasp?"

"I made no bargain."

"You cheated me, Joseph, of a lot of living. You threw me away when I was no

longer of any use to you, and let me rot. I forgive you all that. It's in the past.

But death, Joseph"-he finished the shuffling-"that's in the future. The near future.

And I will not be alone when I go into it."

"I've made my apologies. If you want acts of contrition, name them."

"Nothing."

"You want my balls? My eyes? Take them!"

"Play the game, Pilgrim."

Whitehead stood up. "I don't want to play!"

"But you asked."

Whitehead stared down at the cards laid out on the inlaid table.

"That's how you got me here," he said quietly. "That fucking game."

"Sit down, Pilgrim."

"Made me suffer the torments of the damned."

"Have I?" Mamoulia said, concern lacing his voice. "Have you really

suffered? If you have, I'm truly sorry. The point of temptation is surely that some

of the goods be worth the price."

"Are you the Devil?"

"You know I'm not," Mamoulia said, pained by this new melodrama.

"Every man

is his own Mephistopheles, don't you think? If I hadn't come along you'd have made a

bargain with some other power. And you would have had your fortune, and your women,

and your strawberries. All those torments I've made you suffer."

Whitehead listened to the fluting voice lay these ironies out. Of course, he

hadn't suffered: he'd lived a life of delights. Mamouljian read the thought off his

face.

"If I'd really wanted you to suffer," he said, snail-slow, "I could have had

that dubious satisfaction many years ago. And you know it."

Whitehead nodded. The candle, which the European now lifted onto the table

beside the dealt cards, guttered.

"What I want from you is something far more permanent than suffering,"

Mamouljian said. "Now play. My fingers are itching."

71

Marty got out of the car and stood for several seconds looking up at the looming

bulk of the Hotel Pandemonium. It was not completely in darkness. A light, albeit

frail, glimmered in one of the penthouse windows. He began, for a second time today,

across the wasteland, his body shaking. Carys had made no contact with him since he

had started on his journey here. He didn't question her silence: there were too many

plausible reasons for it, none of them pleasant.

As he approached he could see that the front door of the hotel had been

forced. At least he'd be able to enter by a direct route instead of clambering up

the fire escape. He stepped over the litter of planks, and through the grandiose

doorway into the foyer, halting to accustom his eyes to the darkness before he began

a cautious ascent of the burned stairs. In the gloom every sound he made was like

gunfire at a funeral, shockingly loud. Try as he might to hush his tread, the

stairway hid too many obstacles for complete silence; every step he took he was

certain the European was hearing, was readying himself to breathe a killing

emptiness onto him.

Once he reached the spot he'd entered from the fire escape, the going got

easier. It was only as he advanced into the carpeted regions he realized-the thought

brought a smile to his lips-that he'd come without either a weapon or a plan,

however primitive, of how he was to snatch Carys. All he could hope was that she was

no longer an important item on the European's agenda: that she might be overlooked

for a few vital moments. As he stepped onto the final staircase he caught sight of

himself in one of the hall mirrors: thin, unshaven, his face still bearing traces of

bloodstains, his shirt dark with blood-he looked like a lunatic. The image,

reflecting so accurately the way he'd pictured himself-desperate, barbarous-gave him

Page 404

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

courage. He and his reflection agreed: he was out of his mind.

For only the second time in their long association they sat facing each other over

the tiny table, and played chemin de fer. The game was uneventful; they were, it

seemed, more evenly matched than they'd been in Muranowski Square, forty odd years

before. And as they played, they talked. The talk too was calm and undramatic: of

Evangeline, of how the market had fallen of late, of America, even, as the game

progressed, of Warsaw.

"Have you ever been back?" Whitehead asked.

The European shook his head.

"It's terrible, what they did."

"The Germans?"

"The city planners."

They played on. The cards were shuffled and dealt again, shuffled and dealt.

The breeze of their motions made the candle flame flicker. The game went one way,

then the other. The conversation faltered, and began again: chatty, almost banal. It

was as though in these last minutes together-when they had so much to say-they could

say nothing of the least significance, for fear it open the floodgates. Only once

did the chat show its true colors-escalating from a simple remark to metaphysics in

mere seconds:

"I think you're cheating," the European observed lightly. "You'd know if I

was. All the tricks I use are yours."

"Oh, come now."

"It's true. Everything I learned about cheating, I learned from you."
The

European looked almost flattered.

"Even now," Whitehead said.

"Even now what?"

"You're still cheating, aren't you? You shouldn't be alive, not at your age."

"It's true."

"You look the way you did in Warsaw, give or take a scar. What age are you?"

A hundred? Hundred and fifty?"

"Older."

"And what's it done for you? You're more afraid than I am. You need someone

to hold your hand while you die, and you chose me."

"Together, we might never have died."

"Oh?"

"We might have founded worlds."

"I doubt it."

Mamouljian sighed. "It was all appetite then? From the beginning."

"Most of it."

"You never cared to make sense of it all?"

"Sense? There's no sense to be made. You told me that: the first lesson.

It's all chance."

The European threw down his cards, having lost the hand. ". . . Yes," he

said.

"Another game?" Whitehead offered.

"Just one more. Then we really must be going."

At the head of the stairs Marty halted. The door of Whitehead's suite was slightly

ajar. He had no idea of the geography of the rooms beyond-the two suites he'd

investigated on this floor had been totally different, and he could not predict the

layout of this one from theirs. He thought back to his earlier conversation with

Whitehead. When it was over he'd had the distinct impression that the old man had

walked quite a distance before an interior door had closed to bring an end to the

exchange. A long hallway then, possibly offering some hiding places.

It was no use hesitating; standing there juggling his odds only worsened the

nervous anticipation he felt. He must act.

At the door itself he halted again. There was a murmur of voices from

inside, but muffled, as if the speakers were beyond closed doors. He put his fingers

on the door of the suite and pushed gently. It swung open a few more inches and he

peered inside. There was, as he'd guessed, an empty corridor leading into the suite

itself; off it, four doors. Three were closed, one ajar. From behind one of the

closed doors came the voices he'd heard. He concentrated, trying to pick some sense

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

from the murmur, but he failed to catch more than an odd word. He recognized the

speakers, however: one was Whitehead, the other Mamouliau. And the tone of the

exchange was apparent too; gentlemanly, civilized.

Not for the first time he longed to possess the ability to go to Carys the

way that she had come to him; to seek out her location with mind alone, and to

debate the best means of escape. As it was, all-as ever-was chance.

He advanced along the hallway to the first closed door, and surreptitiously

opened it. Though the lock made some noise the voices in the far room murmured on,

unalerted to his presence. The room he peered into was a cloakroom, no more. He

closed the door and advanced a few more yards down the carpeted corridor. Through

the open door he could hear movement, then the clink of glass. A candle shadow,

thrown by someone inside, flitted across the wall. He stood absolutely still,

reluctant to retreat a foot now that he'd got so far. Voices drifted from the

adjacent room.

"Shit, Chad," the speaker sounded almost fearful. "What the fuck are we

doing here? I can't think properly."

The objection was met with laughter. "You don't need to think. We're on

God's work here, Tommy. Drink up."

"Something terrible's going to happen," Tom said.

"Sure as shit," Chad replied. "Why'd you think we're here. Now drink."

Marty had rapidly worked out the identity of this pair. They were here on

God's work: including murder. He had seen them buying ice creams in the afternoon

sun, with their bloody knives safely pocketed. Fear overrode the urge to revenge,

however. He had little enough chance of getting out of here alive as it was.

There was one last door to be investigated, directly opposite the room

occupied by the young Americans. In order to check it, he would have to cross in

front of the open door.

The lazy voice began again.

"You look like you want to puke."

"Why don't you let me alone?" the other replied. He seemed, or was this just

wishful thinking? to be moving away. Then came the unmistakable sound of retching.

Marty held his breath. Would the other youth go to his companion's aid? He prayed

so.

"You OK, Tommy?" The voice changed timbre as the speaker moved. Yes, he was

walking away from the door. Taking chance by the throat, Marty stepped smartly off

from the wall, opened the final door, closing it behind him.

The room he had entered was not large, but it was dark. By the little light

there was he could see a figure lying curled up on the floor. It was Carys. She was

sleeping; her even exhalations marked a gentle rhythm.

He went to where she lay. How to wake her: that was the problem. Next door,

one wall away, was the European. If she made the slightest sound as he roused her,

he would surely hear. And if he didn't, the Americans would.

He went down on his haunches and gently laid his hand over her mouth, then

shook her shoulder. She seemed resistant to waking. She frowned in her sleep and

muttered some complaint. He bent closer to her and risked hissing her name urgently

into her ear. That did the trick. Her eyes sprang open, wide as an astonished

child's; her mouth formed a cry against his palm. Recognition came the instant

before she gave voice.

He removed his hand. There was no welcoming smile; her face was pallid and

grim, but she touched his lips with her fingertips in welcome. He stood up, offering

her a hand.

Next door, a row had suddenly erupted. The mellow voices were raised in

mutual accusation; furniture was being overturned. Mamouljian shouted for Chad. In

answer there came the thud of feet from the bathroom.

"Damn." There was no time for tactical thinking. They'd have to make a break

for it and take what the moment offered, good or bad. He pulled Carys to her feet

and crossed to the door. As he turned the handle he glanced over his shoulder to

check that Carys was still following him, but disaster had registered on her face.

He turned back to the door and the reason-Saint Thomas, his chin shiny with

vomit-was standing directly outside the door. He was apparently as startled to see

Marty as the other way around. Using his hesitation, Marty stepped into the hallway

and pushed Tom in the chest. The American fell back, the word "Chad!" escaping his

lips as he stumbled through the open door opposite, knocking over a

bowl of

strawberries as he did so. The fruit rolled underfoot.

Page 406

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

Marty ducked around the dressing-room door and out into the hall, but the

American recovered his balance with speed, and reached out to snatch the back of his

shirt. The attempt was sufficient to slow Marty down, and as he turned to beat the

arresting hand away he saw the second American emerging from the room the old men

were in. There was a frightening serenity in the youth's eyes as he closed in on

Marty.

"Run!" was all he could shout to Carys, but the blond god stopped her as she

slipped out into the corridor, pushing her back the way she'd come with a breathed

"No," before continuing on his way toward Marty. "Hold her," he told his companion

as he took over the hold on Marty. Tom stepped out of sight after Carys, and there

was a noise of struggle, but Marty had little time to analyze it, as Chad doubled

him up with a blow to the stomach. Marty, too confused by the sudden rush of action

to prepare for the pain, groaned and fell back against the front door of the suite,

slamming it. The blond boy followed him down the corridor, and through tear-bleared

eyes Marty just caught sight of the next blow before it landed. He didn't see the

third or fourth. There was no time between the punches and kicks to stand upright or

catch a breath. The corn-fed body pummeling him was lithe and strong, more than

Marty's equal. Vainly, he flailed against the tattoo. He was so damn tired and sick.

His nose began to bleed again, and still the serene eyes fixed him as the fists beat

his body black. So calm, those eyes, they could have been at prayer. But it was

Marty who was falling to his knees; Marty whose head was dragged back in enforced

adulation as the blond boy spat on him; Marty who said, "Help me"-or some bruised

corruption of those words-as he collapsed.

Mamouljian stepped out of the gaming room, leaving the pilgrim to his tears.

He'd done as the old man had asked-they'd played a game or two for old times' sake.

But now the indulgence was over. And what was this chaos in the hall; the tangle of

limbs at the front door, blood spattered on the wall? Ah, it was Strauss. Somehow

the European had expected a late arrival at the celebrations; who it was to be, he

hadn't foreseen. He stalked the corridor to see what damage had been done, looking

down at the disfigured, spittle-laced face with a sigh. Saint Chad, his fists

bloody, was sweating a little: the scent off the young lion was sweet.

"He was almost away," the Saint said.

"Indeed," the European replied, gesturing for the youth to give him room.

From his collapsed position on the hall floor Marty gazed up at the Last

European. The air between them seemed to be itching. Marty waited. Surely the

killing stroke would follow quickly. But there was nothing, except the gaze from

those noncommittal eyes. Even in his broken state Marty could see the tragedy

written in the mask of Mamoulia's face. It no longer terrified him: simply

fascinated. This man was the source of the nullity he had barely survived in Caliban

Street. Was there not a ghost of that gray air lurking in his sockets now, seeping

from his nostrils and mouth as though a fire smoldered in his cranium?

In the room where he and the European had played cards Whitehead moved

stealthily across to the pillow of his makeshift bed. Events in the hall had shifted

the focus for a useful moment. He slipped his hand beneath the pillow and drew out

the gun hidden there, then crept through into the adjoining dressing room, and

slipped out of sight behind the wardrobe.

From that position he could see Saint Tom and Carys standing in the hallway,

watching events at the front door. Both were too intent on the gladiators to notice

in the darkened room.

"Is he dead . . .?" Tom asked, from a distance.

"Who knows?" Whitehead heard Mamoulian reply. "Put him in the bathroom, out

of the way."

Whitehead watched as Strauss' inert bulk was hauled past the door and into

the room opposite, to be dumped in the bathroom. Mamoulian approached Carys.

"You brought him here," he said simply.

She didn't reply. Whitehead's gun hand itched. From where he was standing

Mamoulian made an easy target, except that Carys stood in the way. Would a bullet,

fired at her back, pass through her and into the European? The thought, though

appalling, had to be contemplated: survival was at issue here. But the moment's

hesitation had snatched his chance. The European was escorting Carys toward the

gaming room, and out of shot. No matter; it left the coast clear.

He slipped out of hiding and darted to the dressing-room door. As he stepped

into the corridor he heard Mamouljian say: "Joseph?" Whitehead ran the few yards to

the front door, knowing the chance of escape without violence was gossamer-thin. He

Page 407

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

grabbed the handle and turned it.

"Joseph," said the voice behind him.

Whitehead's hand froze as he felt invisible fingers plucking at the nape of

his neck. He ignored the pressure and forced the handle around. It slid in his

sweaty palm. The thought that breathed at his neck pressed around his axis vertebra,

the threat unmistakable. Well then, he thought, the choice is out of my hands. He

released the door handle and turned fully around to face the card-player. He was

standing at the end of the corridor, which seemed to be darkening, becoming a tunnel

extruded from Mamouljian's eyes. Such potent illusions. But simply that: illusions.

He could resist them long enough to bring their forger down. Whitehead raised the

gun and pointed it at the European. Without giving the card-player another moment to

confound him, he fired. The first shot hit Mamouljian's chest; the second his

stomach. Perplexity crossed the European's face. Blood spread from the wounds across

his shirt. He did not fall, however. Instead, in a voice so even it was as if the

shots had not been fired, he said: "Do you want to go outside, Pilgrim?"

Behind Whitehead, the door handle had started to rattle.

"Is that what you want?" Mamouljian demanded. "To go outside?"

"Yes."

"Then go."

Whitehead stepped away from the door as it was flung open with such venom

the handle impaled itself in the corridor wall. The old man turned away from

Mamouljian to make good his escape, but before he could take a step the light in the

corridor was sucked away into the pitch darkness beyond the door, and to his horror

Whitehead realized that the hotel had disappeared from beyond the threshold. There

were no carpets and mirrors out there; no stairs winding down to the outside world.

Only a wilderness he'd walked in half a life ago: a square, a sky shot with

trembling stars.

"Go out," the European invited him. "It's been waiting for you all these years. Go on! Go!"

The floor beneath Whitehead's feet seemed to have become slick; he felt

himself sliding toward the past. His face was washed by the open air as it glided

into the hallway to meet him. It smelled of spring, of the Vistula, which roared to

the sea ten minutes' walk from here; it smelled of blossom too. Of course it smelled

of blossom. What he'd mistaken for stars were petals, white petals lifted by the

breeze and gusted toward him. The sight of the petals was too persuasive to be

ignored; he let them lead him back into this glorious night, when for a few

shimmering hours the whole world had promised to be his for the taking. Even as he

conceded his senses to the night the tree appeared, as phenomenal as he had so often

dreamed it, its white head shaking slightly. Somebody lurked in the shade beneath

its laden branches; their smallest movement caused a new cascade. His

entranced

reason made one final snatch at the reality of the hotel, and he reached to touch

the door of the suite, but his hand missed it in the darkness. There was no time to

look again. The obscured watcher was emerging from the cover of the branches. Déjà

vu suffused Whitehead; except that the first time he'd been here there had only been

a glimpse of the man beneath the tree. This time the reluctant sentinel broke cover.

Smiling a welcome, Lieutenant Konstantin Vasiliev showed his burned face to the man

who'd come visiting from the future. Tonight the lieutenant would not shamble off

for a rendezvous with a dead woman; tonight he would embrace the thief, who had

grown furrowed and bearded, but whose presence here he'd awaited a lifetime.

"We thought you'd never come," Vasiliev said. He pushed a branch aside and

stepped fully into the dead light of this fantastical night. He was proud to show

himself, though his hair was entirely burned off, his face black and red, his body

full of holes. His trousers were open; his member erect. Perhaps, later, they would

go to his mistress together, he and the thief. Drink vodka like old friends. He

grinned at Whitehead. "I told them you'd come eventually. I knew you would. To see

us again."

Whitehead raised the gun he still had in his hand, and fired at the lieutenant. The illusion was not interrupted by this violence, however, merely

reinforced. Shouts-in Russian-echoed from beyond the square.

"Now look what you've done," Vasiliev said. "Now the soldiers will come."

The thief recognized his error. He had never used a gun after a curfew: it

was an invitation to arrest. He heard booted feet running, close by.

"We must hurry," the lieutenant insisted, casually spitting out the bullet,

which he had caught between his teeth.

Page 408

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

"I'm not going with you," Whitehead said.

"But we've waited so long," Vasiliev replied, and shook the branch to cue

the next act. The tree raised its limbs like a bride, shrugging off its trousseau of

blossom. Within moments the air was thick with a blizzard of petals. As they

settled, spilling their radiance onto the ground, the thief began to pick out the

familiar faces that waited beneath the branches. People who, down the years, had

come to this wasteland, to this tree, and gathered under it with Vasiliev, to rot

and weep. Evangeline was among them, the wounds that had been so tastefully

concealed as she'd lain in her coffin now freely displayed. She did not smile, but

she stretched her arms out to embrace him, her mouth forming his name-"Jojo"-as she

stepped forward. Bill Toy was behind her, in evening dress, as if for the Academy.

His ears bled. Beside him, her face opened from lip to brow, was a woman in a

nightgown. There were others too, some of whom he recognized, many of whom he

didn't. The woman who'd led him to the card-player was there, bare-breasted, as he

remembered her. Her smile was as distressing as ever. There were soldiers too,

others who'd lost to Mamoulia like Vasiliev. One wore a skirt in addition to his

bullet holes. From under its folds a snout appeared. Saul-his carcass ravaged-sniffed his old master, and growled.

"See how long we've waited?" Vasiliev said.

The lost faces were all looking at Whitehead, their mouths open. No sound emerged.

"I can't help you."

"We want to cease," the lieutenant said.

"Go, then."

"Not without you. He won't die without you."

Finally the thief understood. This place, which he'd glimpsed in the sauna

at the Sanctuary, existed within the European. These ghosts were creatures he'd

devoured. Evangeline! Even she. They waited, the tattered remains of them, in this

no-man's-land between flesh and death, until Mamoulia sickened of existence and lay

down and perished. Then they too, presumably, would have their liberty. Until then

their faces would make that soundless O at him, a melancholy appeal.

The thief shook his head.

"No," he said.

He would not give up his breath. Not for an orchard of trees, not for a nation of despairing faces. He turned his back on Muranowski Square and its

plaintive ghosts. The soldiers were shouting nearby: soon they would arrive. He

looked back toward the hotel. The penthouse corridor was still there, across the

doorstep of a bombed house: a surreal juxtaposition of ruin and luxury. He crossed

the rubble toward it, ignoring the soldiers' orders for him to halt.
Vasiliev's

cries were loudest, however. "Bastard!" he screeched. The thief
blocked his curses

and stepped out of the square and back into the heat of the hallway,
raising his gun

as he did so.

"Old news," he said, "you don't scare me with it." Mamoulia was still
standing at the other end of the corridor; the minutes the thief had
spent in the

square had not elapsed here. "I'm not afraid!" Whitehead shouted.
"You hear me, you

soulless bastard? I'm not afraid!" He fired again, this time at the
European's head.

The shot hit his cheek. Blood came. Before Whitehead could fire
again, Mamoulia

retaliated.

"There are no limits," he said, his voice trembling, "to what I shall do!"

His thought caught the thief by the throat, and twisted. The old man's
limbs

convulsed; the gun flew out of his hand; his bladder and bowels failed
him. Behind

him, in the square, the ghosts began to applaud. The tree shook itself
with such

vehemence that the few blossoms it still carried were swept into the
air. Some of

them flew toward the door, melting on the threshold of past and
present, like

snowflakes. Whitehead fell against the wall. Out of the corner of his eye he caught

sight of Evangeline, spitting blood at him. He began to slide down the wall, his

body jangled as if in the throes of a grand mal. He let out one word through his

rattling jaws. He said:

"No!"

On the bathroom floor Marty heard the denial howled out. He tried to stir

himself, but his consciousness was sluggish, and his beaten body ached from scalp to

skin. Taking hold of the bath, he hoisted himself to his knees. He'd clearly been

forgotten: his part in the proceedings was purely comic relief. He tried to stand,

but his lower limbs were traitorous; they buckled beneath him, and he fell again,

Page 409

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

feeling every bruise on impact.

In the hallway Whitehead had sunk down onto his haunches, mouth gaga. The

European moved in for the coup de grâce, but Carys interrupted.

"Leave him," she said.

Distracted, Mamouljian turned toward her. The blood on his cheek had traced a

single line to his jaw. "You too," he murmured. "No limits." Carys backed off into

the gaming room. The candle on the table had begun to flare. Energy was loose in the

suite, and the spitting flame was fat and white on it. The European looked at Carys

with hunger in his eyes. There was an appetite on him-an instinctive response to his

blood loss-and all he could see in her was nourishment. Like the thief: hungry for

another strawberry though his belly was full enough.

"I know what you are," Carys said, deflecting his gaze.

From the bathroom, Marty heard her ploy. Stupid, he thought, to tell him

that.

"I know what you did."

The European's eyes widened, smoky.

"You're nobody," the girl started to say. "You're just a soldier who met a

monk, and strangled him in his sleep. What have you got to be so proud of?" Her fury

beat against his face. "You're nobody! Nobody and nothing!"

He reached to catch hold of her. She dodged him around the cardtable once,

but he threw it over, the pack scattering, and caught her. His hold felt like a vast

leech on her arm, taking blood from her and giving only the void,

only purposeless

dark. He was the Architect of her dreams again.

"God help me," she breathed. Her senses crumbled and grayness streamed in to

take their place. He pulled her out of her body with one insolent wrench and took

her into him, dropping her husk to the floor beside the overturned table. He wiped

his mouth with the back of his hand and looked up at the evangelists. They were

standing in the doorway staring at him. He felt sick with his greed. She was in

him-all of her at once-and it was too much. And the Saints were making it worse,

looking at him as though he were something loathsome, the dark one shaking his head.

"You killed her," he said. "You killed her."

The European turned away from the accusations, his system boiling over, and

leaned elbow and forearm on the wall like a drunk about to vomit. Her presence in

him was a torment. It wouldn't be still, it raged and raged. And her turbulence

unlocked so much more: Strauss piercing his bowels; the dogs at his heels,

unleashing blood and smoke; and then back, back beyond these few terrible months to

other ordeals: yards and snow and starlight and women and hunger,

always hunger. And

still at his back he felt the stare of the Christians.

One of them spoke; the blond boy whom once he might have lusted after. He,

and she, and all.

"Is this all there is?" he demanded to know. "Is this all, you fucking liar?

You promised us the Deluge."

The European pressed his hand over his mouth to stem the escaping smoke and

pictured a wave curling over the hotel, over the city, descending to sweep Europe

away.

"Don't tempt me," he said.

In the hallway Whitehead, his neck broken, became vaguely aware of a perfume in the

air. He could see the landing outside the suite from where he was lying. Muranowski

Square, with its fatal tree, had long since faded, leaving only the mirrors and the

carpets. Now, as he sprawled beside the door, he heard somebody come up the stairs.

He glimpsed a figure moving in the shadows; this was the perfumed one. The newcomer

approached slowly, but doggedly; hesitating for only a moment at the threshold

before stepping over Whitehead's crumpled form and making his way

toward the room

where the two men had played cards. There had been a while, as they'd chatted over

the game, that the old man had fancied he might yet make a fresh covenant with the

European; might escape for a few more years the inevitable catastrophe. But it had

all gone wrong. They had rowed over some trivia, the way lovers do, and by some

incomprehensible mathematic it had escalated to this: death.

He rolled himself over so that he could look the other way, down the

corridor toward the gaming room. Carys was lying on the floor among the spilled

cards. He could see her corpse through the open door. The European had devoured her.

Now the newcomer interrupted his view as he lurched to the door. From where

he lay Whitehead hadn't been able to see the man's face. But he saw the shine on the

Page 410

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

machete at his side.

Tom caught sight of the Razor-Eater before Chad. His unruly stomach rebelled at the

mingled stench of sandalwood and putrefaction, and he threw up on the old man's bed

as Breer stepped into the room. He'd come a long way, and the miles

had not been

kind, but he was here.

Mamouliau stood upright from the wall and faced Breer.

He was not entirely surprised to see that rotted face, though he wasn't sure

why. Was it that his mind had not quite relinquished its hold on the Razor-Eater,

and that Breer was somehow here at his behest? Breer stared at Mamouliau through the

bright air, as if awaiting a new instruction before he acted again. The muscles of

his face were so deteriorated that each flicker of his eyeball threatened to tear

the skin of its orbit. He looked, thought Chad-his mind high on cognac-like a man

full to bursting with butterflies. Their wings beat against the confines of his

anatomy; they powdered his bones in their fervor. Soon their relentless motion would

split him open and the air would be full of them.

The European looked down at the machete Breer was carrying.

"Why did you come?" he wanted to know.

The Razor-Eater tried to reply, but his tongue rebelled against the duty.

There was just a soft palate word that could have been "good," or "got" or "God,"

but was none of them.

"Have you come to be killed? Is that it?"

Breer shook his head. He had no such intention, and Mamoulia knew it. Death

was the least of his problems. He raised the blade at his side to signal his

intentions.

"I can wipe you out," Mamoulia said.

Again, Breer shook his head. "Egg," he said, which Mamoulia interpreted,

and repeated as "Dead."

"Dead . . ." Chad mused. "God in Heaven. The man's dead."

The European murmured the affirmative.

Chad smiled. Maybe they were going to be cheated of the destroying wave.

Perhaps the Reverend's calculations had been wrong, and the Deluge wouldn't be on

them for a few more months. What did it matter? He had stories to tell-such stories.

Even Bliss, with all his talk of the demons in the soul of the hemisphere, hadn't

known about scenes like this. The Saint watched, licking his lips with anticipation.

In the hallway, Whitehead had managed to drag himself three or four yards

away from the front door, and he could see Marty, who had managed to stand. Leaning

on the lintel of the bathroom door, Marty felt the old man's eyes on

him. Whitehead

raised a beckoning hand. Groggily, Marty lurched into the hallway, his presence

ignored by the actors in the gaming room. It was dark out here; the light in the

gaming room, that livid candlelight, was all but sealed off by the partially closed

door.

Marty knelt at Whitehead's side. The old man took hold of his shirt.

"You've got to fetch her," he said, the voice almost faded. His eyes bulged,

there was blood in his beard, and more coming with each word, but his hold was

strong. "Fetch her, Marty," he hissed.

"What are you talking about?"

"He has her," Whitehead said. "In him. Fetch her, for Christ's sake, or

she'll be there forever, like the others." His eyes flicked in the direction of the

landing, remembering the scourge of Muranowski Square. Was she there already? A

prisoner under the tree, with Vasiliev's eager hands on her? The old man's lips

began to tremble. "Can't . . . let him have her, boy," he said. "You hear me. Won't

let him have her."

Marty had difficulty sewing the sense of this together. Was Whitehead

suggesting that he should find his way into Mamoulia and retrieve Carys? It wasn't

possible.

"I can't," he said.

The old man registered disgust, and let go of Marty as though he'd discovered he had hold of excrement. Painfully, he turned his head away.

Marty looked toward the gaming room. Through the gap in the door he could

see Mamoulia moving toward the unmistakable figure of the Razor-Eater. There was

frailty on the European's face. Marty studied it for a moment, and then looked down

at the European's feet. Carys lay there, her face startled by cessation, her skin

bright. He could do nothing; why didn't Papa leave him be to run away into the night

Page 411

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

and heal his bruises? He could do nothing.

And if he ran; if he found a place to hide, to heal, would he ever wash away

the smell of his cowardice? Would this moment-the roads dividing, and dividing

again-not be burned into his dreams forever? He looked back at Papa. But for the

feeble movement of his lips he could have already been dead. "Fetch

her," he was

still saying, a catechism to be repeated until his breath failed. "Fetch her. Fetch

her."

Marty had asked something similar of Carys-to go into the lunatic's lair and

come back with a story to tell. How could he now not return the favor? Fetch her.

Fetch her. Papa's words were fading with every beat of his failing heart. Maybe she

was retrievable, Marty thought, somewhere in the flux of Mamoulia's body. And if

not, if not, would it be so hard to die trying to fetch her, and have an end to

roads dividing, and choices turning to ash?

But how? He tried to recall how she'd done it, but the procedures were too

elaborate-the washing, the silence-and surely he had scant opportunity to make his

voyage before circumstances changed. His only source of hope lay in the fact of his

bloody shirt-the way he'd felt, on his way here, that Carys had snapped some barrier

in his head, and that the damage, once done, was permanent. Perhaps his mind could

go to her through the wound she'd opened, tracing her scent as relentlessly as she'd

pursued his.

He closed his eyes, shutting off the hallway and Whitehead and the body

lying at the European's feet. Sight was a trap; she'd said that once. Effort too. He

must let go. Let instinct and imagination take him where sense and intellect could

not.

He conjured her, effortlessly, putting the bleak fact of her corpse out of

his head and evoking instead her living smile. In his mind he spoke her name and she

came to him in a dozen moments: laughing, naked, puzzled, contrite. But he let the

particulars go, leaving only her essential presence in his aching head.

He was dreaming her. The wound was open, and it pained him to touch it

again. Blood was running into his open mouth, but the sensation was a distant

phenomenon. It had little to do with his present condition, which was increasingly

dislocated. He felt as though he was slipping his body off. It was redundant: waste

matter. The ease of the procedure astonished him; his only anxiety was that he'd

become too eager; he had to control his exhilaration for fear he throw caution to

the wind and be discovered.

He could see nothing; hear nothing. The state he moved in-did he

even

move?-was not susceptible to the senses. Now, though he had no proof of the

perception, he was sure he was abstracted from his body. It was behind, below him:

an untenanted shell. Ahead of him, Carys. He would dream his way to her.

And then, just as he had thought he could take pleasure in this

extraordinary journey. Hell opened in front of him-

Mamouljian, too intent on the Razor-Eater, felt nothing as Marty breached him. Breer

made a half-run forward, lifting the machete and aiming a blow at the European. He

sidestepped to avoid it with perfect economy but Breer pivoted around for a second

strike with startling speed, and this time, more by chance than direction, the

machete glanced down Mamouljian's arm, slicing into the cloth of his dark gray suit.

"Chad," the European said, not taking his eyes off Breer.

"Yes?" the blond boy replied. He was still leaning on the wall beside the

door, posed there like an indolent hero; he had found Whitehead's cache of cigars,

pocketing several and lighting one. He blew a cloud of dusty blue smoke, and watched

the gladiators through a blur of drink. "What do you want?"

"Find the pilgrim's gun."

"Why?"

"For our visitor."

"Kill him yourself," Chad replied nonchalantly, "you can do it."

Mamouliau's mind revolted at the thought of laying his flesh on such decay;

better a bullet. At close range it would lay the Razor-Eater to waste. Without a

head even the dead couldn't walk.

"Fetch the gun!" he demanded.

"No," Chad replied. The Reverend had said plain speaking was best.

"This is no time for games," Mamouliau said, taking his attention off Breer

for a moment to glance across at Chad. It was an error. The dead man swung the

machete again, and this time the blow found Mamouliau's shoulder, lodging in the

Page 412

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

muscle close to his neck. The European made no sound but a grunt as the blow fell,

and a second as Breer pulled the blade out of its niche.

"Stop," he told his assailant.

Breer shook his head. This was what he had come for, wasn't it? This was the

prelude to an act he'd waited so long to perform.

Mamouljian put his hand up to the wound at his shoulder. Bullets he could

take and survive; but a more traumatic attack, one that compromised the integrity of

his flesh-that was dangerous. He had to finish Breer off, and if the Saint wouldn't

fetch the gun then he'd have to kill the Razor-Eater with his bare hands.

Breer seemed to sense his intention. "You can't hurt me," he tried to say,

the words coming out in a jumble. "I'm dead."

Mamouljian shook his head. "Limb from limb," he murmured. "If I must. Limb

from limb."

Chad grinned, hearing the European's promise. Sweet Jesus, he thought, this

was the way the world would end. A warren of rooms, cars on the freeway winding

their last way home, the dead and almost dead exchanging blows by candlelight. The

Reverend had been wrong. The Deluge wasn't a wave, was it? It was blind men with

axes; it was the great on their knees begging not to die at the hands of idiots; it

was the itch of the irrational grown to an epidemic. He watched, and thought of how

he would describe this scene to the Reverend, and for the first time in

his nineteen

years his pretty head felt a spasm of pure joy.

Marty hadn't realized how pleasurable the experience of travel had been a passenger

of pure thought-until he plunged into Mamoulia's body. He felt like a skinned man

immersed in boiling oil. He thrashed, his essence screeching for an end to this Hell

of another man's physicality. But Carys was here. He had to keep that thought

uppermost, a touchstone.

In this maelstrom his feelings for her had the purity of mathematics. Its

equations-complex, but elegant in their proofs-offered a nicety that was like truth.

He had to hold on to this recognition. If he once relinquished it he was lost.

Though without senses, he felt this new state struggling to impinge a vision

of itself upon him. At the corners of his blind eyes lights flared perspective

opened up and closed again in an instant-suns threatened to ignite overhead and were

snuffed out before they could shed warmth or illumination. Some irritation possessed

him: an itch of lunacy. Scratch me, it said, and you needn't sweat anymore. He

countered the seduction with thoughts of Carys.

Gone, the itch said, deeper than you'd dare to go. So much deeper.

What it claimed was perhaps true. He'd swallowed her whole, taken her down

to wherever he kept his favorite things. To the place where the zero he'd tampered

with at Caliban Street was sourced. Face-to-face with such a vacuum he would

shrivel: there would be no reprieve this time. Such a place, the itch salad, such a

terrible place. You want to see?

No.

Come on, look! Look and tremble! Look and cease! You wanted to know what he

was, well you're about to get a worm's-eye view.

I'm not listening, Marty thought. He pressed on, and though-like Caliban

Street-there was no up or down, no forward or back in this place, he had a sense of

descent.. Was it just the metaphors he carried with him, that he pictured Hell as a

pit? Or was he crawling through the European's innards to the bowel where Carys was

hidden?

Of course you'll never get out, the itch said with a smile. Not once you get

down there. There's no way back. He'll never shit you out. You'll stay locked up in

there, once and for all.

Carys got out, he reasoned.

She was in his head, the itch reminded him. She was flipping through his

library. You're buried in the dung-heap; and deep, oh, yes, my man, so deep.

No!

For certain.

No!

Mamouljian shook his head. It was full of strange aches; voices too. Or was that just

the past chattering to him? Yes, the past. It had buzzed and gossiped in his ear

more loudly in these recent weeks than ever in the preceding decades. Whenever his

mind had idled, the gravity of history had claimed it, and he had been back in the

Page 413

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

monastery yard with the snow falling and the drummer-boy at his right-hand side

quaking, and the parasites leaving the bodies as they cooled. Two hundred years of

life had sprung from that conspiracy of moments. Had the shot that killed the

executioner been delayed by mere seconds the sword would have fallen, his head would

have rolled, and the centuries he'd lived would not have contained him; nor he they.

And why did this cycle of thoughts return now, as he looked at Anthony

across the room? They were a thousand miles and seventeen decades from that event.

I'm not in danger, he chided himself, so why quake? Breer was teetering on the edge

of total collapse; dispatching him was a simple, if distasteful, task.

He moved suddenly, his good hand snatching at Breer's throat before the

other had a chance to retaliate. The European's slender fingers dug through the mush

and closed around Breer's esophagus. Then he pulled, hard. A goodly portion of

Breer's neck came away in a splutter of grease and fluids. There was a sound like

escaping steam.

Chad applauded, cigar in mouth. In the corner where he'd collapsed Tom had

stopped whimpering and was also watching the mutilation. One man fighting for his

life, the other for his death. Hallelujah! Saints and sinners all together.

Mamouliau flung the fistful of muck away. Despite his formidable injury, the

Razor-Eater was still standing.

"Must I tear you apart?" Mamouliau said. Even as he spoke, something

scrabbled inside him. Was the girl still fighting her confinement?

"Who's there?" he asked softly.

Carys answered. Not to Mamoulia, but to Marty. Here, she said. He heard her. No,

not heard: felt. She summoned him, and he followed.

The itch in Marty was in seventh heaven. Too late to help her, it said: too

late for anything now.

But she was close by, he knew it, her presence choking back his panic. I'm

with you, she said. Two of us now.

The itch was unimpressed. It smirked at the thought of escape. You're sealed

up forever, it said, better concede it. If she can't get out, why should you be able

to?

Two, Carys said. Two of us now. For the frailest of moments he caught the

intention in her words. They were together, and together they were more than a sum

of their parts. He thought of their locking anatomies-the physical act that was

metaphor for this other unity. He'd never understood until now. His mind jubilated.

She was with him: he with her. They were one indivisible thought, imagining each

other.

Go!

And Hell divided; it had no choice. The province fragmented as they delivered themselves out of the European's grasp. They experienced a few exquisite

moments as one mind, and then gravity-or whatever law pertained in this

state-demanded its lot. Division came-a rude expulsion from this momentary Eden-and

they were plummeting now toward their own bodies, the conjunction over.

Mamouljian felt their escape as a wounding more traumatic than any Breer had

so far delivered. He put his finger up to his mouth, a look of pitiful loss on his

face. Tears came freely, diluting the blood on his face. Breer seemed to sense a cue

in this: his moment had come. An image had spontaneously appeared in his liquefying

brain-like one of the grainy photographs in his book of atrocities-except that this

image moved. Snow fell; the flames of a brazier danced.

The machete in his hand felt heavier by the second: more like a sword. He

raised it; its shadow fell across the European's face.

Mamouljian looked at Breer's ruined features and recognized them; saw how it

had all come to this moment. Bowed under a weight of years, he fell to his knees.

As he was doing so, Carys opened her eyes. There had been a vile, grinding

return; more terrible for Marty than for herself, who was used to the sensation. But

it was never entirely pleasant to feel muscle and fat congeal around the spirit.

Marty's eyes had opened too, and he was looking down at the body he occupied. It was heavy, and stale. So much of it-the layers of skin, the hair, the

nails-was dead matter. Its very substance revolted him. Being in this state was a

parody of the freedom he'd just tasted. He started up from his slumped position with

a small cry of disgust, as if he'd woken to find his body crawling with insects.

He looked across to Carys for reassurance, but her attention had been claimed by a sight concealed from Marty by the partially closed door.

Page 414

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

She was watching a spectacle she knew from somewhere. But the point of view

was different, and it took awhile for her to place the scene: the man on his knees,

his neck exposed, his arms spread a little from his body, fingers splayed in the

universal gesture of submission; the executioner, face' blurred, raising the blade

to decapitate his willing victim; somebody laughing somewhere nearby.

The last time she'd seen this tableau she'd been behind Mamoulia's eyes, a

soldier in a snow-spattered yard, awaiting the blow that would cancel his young

life. A blow that had never come; or rather had been deferred until now. Had the

executioner waited so long, living in one body only to discard it for another,

trailing Mamoulia through decade upon decade until at last fate assembled the

pieces of a reunion? Or was this all the European's doing? Had his will summoned

Breer to finish a story accidentally interrupted generations before?

She would never know. The act, begun a second time, was not to be postponed

again. The weapon sliced down, almost dividing head from neck in one blow. A few

tenacious sinews kept it rocking-nose to chest-from the trunk for two succeeding

blows before it departed, rolling down between the European's legs and coming to

rest at Tom's feet. The boy kicked it away.

Mamoulia had made no sound; but now, headless, his torso gave vent: Noise

came from the wound with the blood; complaints sounded, it seemed, from every pore.

And with the sound came smoky ghosts of unmade pictures, rising from him like steam.

Bitter things appeared and fled; dreams, perhaps, or fragments of the past. It was

all one now. Always had been, in fact. He had come from rumor; he the legendary, he

the unfixable, he whose very name was a lie. Could it matter if now his biography,

fleeing into nothingness, was taken as fiction?

Breer, unassuaged, began to berate the open wound of the corpse's neck with

the machete, slicing first down then sideways in an effort to cleave the enemy into

smaller and yet smaller pieces. An arm was summarily lopped off; he picked it up to

sever hand from wrist, forearm from upper arm. In moments the room, which had been

almost serene as the execution took place, became an abattoir.

Marty stumbled to the door in time to see Breer strike off Mamoulia's other

arm.

"Look at him go!" said the American boy, toasting the bloodbath with

Whitehead's vodka.

Marty watched the carnage, unblenched. It was all over. The European was a

dead man. His head lay on its side under the window; it looked small; vestigial.

Carys, flattened against the wall beside the door, caught Marty's hand.

"Papa?" she said. "What about Papa."

As she spoke Mamoulia's corpse pitched forward from its kneeling position.

The ghosts and the din it had spilled had stopped. Now there was only dark blood

splashing from it. Breer bent to further butchery, opening the abdomen with two

slashes. Urine fountained from the punctured bladder.

Carys, revolted by the attacks, slipped out of the room. Marty lingered a

while longer. The last sight he caught as he followed Carys was the Razor-Eater

picking up the head by the hair, like some exotic fruit, and delivering a lateral

cut to it.

In the hallway Carys was crouching at her father's side; Marty joined her.

She stroked the old man's cheek. "Papa?" she said. He wasn't dead, but neither was

he truly alive. There was a flicker in his pulse, no more. His eyes were closed.

"No use . . ." Marty said as she shook the old man's shoulder, "he's as good

as gone."

In the gaming room Chad, had begun to shriek with laughter. Apparently the

slaughterhouse scenes were reaching new heights of absurdist brio.

"I don't want to be here when he gets bored," Marty said. Carys made no

move. "There's nothing we can do for the old man," he said.

She looked at him, bewildered by the dilemma.

"He's gone, Carys. And we should go too."

A silence had started in the abattoir. It was worse, in its way, than the laughter, or the sound of Breer's labors.

"We can't wait around," Marty said. He roughly pulled Carys to her feet and

propelled her toward the front door of the penthouse. She made only faint objection.

As they slipped away downstairs, somewhere up above them the blond American

began to applaud again.

72

Page 415

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

The dead man worked at his work for a good time. Long after the domestic traffic on

the highway had dwindled to a trickle, leaving only the long-distance freight

drivers to roar their way north. Breer heard none of it. His ears had long since

given out, and his eyesight, once so sharp, could barely make sense of the carnage

that now lay on every side of him. But when his sight failed completely, he still

had the rudiments of touch. This he used to finish his commission, dividing and

subdividing the flesh of the European until it was impossible to tell apart the

piece that spoke and the piece that pissed.

Chad tired of the entertainment long before that point was reached. Grinding

out his second cigar with his heel he sauntered through to see how things were

progressing elsewhere. The girl had gone; the hero too. God loves them, he thought.

The old man was still lying in the hallway, however, clutching the gun, which he'd

retrieved at some point in the proceedings. His fingers spasmed once in a while,

nothing more. Chad went back into the bloody chamber, where Breer was on his knees

among the meat and the cards, still chopping, and raised Tom off the floor. He was

in a languid state, his lips almost blue, and it took a good deal of cajoling to get

any action out of him. But Chad was a born proselytizer, and a short talk got some

enthusiasm back into him. "Nothin' we can't do now, you know?" Chad told him. "We're

baptized men. I mean we've seen everything, haven't we? There ain't nothing in this

whole wide world the Devil can fight us with, because we've been there. Ain't we

been there?"

Chad was high on his new-found freedom. He wanted to prove the point, and he

had this fine idea-"You'll like this, Tommy"-of doing a dump on the old man's chest.

Tom didn't seem to care either way, and he just watched while Chad dropped his

trousers to do the dirty work. His bowels would not oblige. As he started to stand

upright, however, Whitehead's eyes snapped open, and the gun fired. The bullet

missed plowing into Chad's testicles by a hairbreadth, but scored a fine red mark on

the inside of his milk-white thigh, and whistled past his face to slam into the

ceiling. Chad's bowels gave then, but the old man was dead; he'd died with the shot

that came so close to blowing off Chad's manhood.

"Near thing," Tom said, his catatonia broken by Chad's near-mutilation.

"Guess I'm just lucky," the blond boy replied. Then they took their revenges

as best they could, and went their way.

I'm the last of the tribe, thought Breer. When I'm gone the Razor-Eaters will be a

thing of the past.

He hauled himself from the Pandemonium Hotel knowing that what coherence his

body had was fast diminishing. His fingers could barely grip the petrol can he'd

stolen from the boot of a car before he'd come to the hotel, and had left, awaiting

these last rites, in the foyer. It was as difficult to grasp with his mind as it was

with his fingers, but he did the best he could. He couldn't name the things that

sniffed at his carcass as he squatted among the rubbish; couldn't even remember who

he was, except that he had seen, once, some fine and wonderful sights.

He twisted the cap off the petrol can and spilled the contents over him as

efficiently as he could. Most of the fluid simply pooled around him. Then he dropped

the can and ferreted, blind, for the matches. The first and second didn't catch. The

third did. Flames instantly engulfed him. In the conflagration his body curled up,

taking on that pugilistic attitude common to the victims of immolation, the joints

shortening as they cooked, drawing arms and legs up into a posture of defense.

When, at last, the games went out, the dogs came to scavenge what they

could. More than one of them went away yelping, however, their palates slit by a

mouthful of meat in which, secreted like pearls in an oyster, were the razor blades

Breer had downed like a gourmet.

XIV

After the Wave

73

Wind had the world.

It blew exactly east-west that evening, carrying the clouds, buoyant after a

day of rain, in the direction of the setting sun, as if they were hurrying to some

Apocalypse just over the horizon. Or perhaps-this thought was worse-they were

rushing to persuade the sun to back up from oblivion for another hour, another

Page 416

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

minute-anything to delay the night. And of course it wouldn't come, and instead the

sun was taking advantage of their fleecy-headed panic to steal them over the edge of

the world.

Carys had tried to persuade Marty that all was well, but she hadn't

succeeded. Now, as he hurried toward the Orpheus Hotel once more, with the clouds

suicidal and the night coming down, he sensed the rightness of his

suspicions. The

whole visible world carried evidence of conspiracy.

Besides, Carys still spoke in her sleep. Not with Mamouliau's voice perhaps,

that cautious, looping, ironic voice that he'd come to know and hate. She didn't

even make words as such. Just scraps of sound: the noise of crabs, of birds trapped

in an attic. Whirrs and scratchings, as though she, or something in her, was

laboring to reinvent a forgotten vocabulary. There was nothing human in it as yet,

but he was certain the European was in hiding there. The more he listened the more

he seemed to hear order in the muttering; the more the noise her sleeping tongue

made sounded like a palate seeking after speech. The thought made him sweat.

And then, the night before this night of rushing clouds, he'd been startled

awake at four in the morning. There were dreadful dreams, of course, and would, he

supposed, be dreams for many years to come. But tonight they were not confined to

his head. They were here. They were now.

Carys was not lying beside him in the narrow bed. She was standing in the

middle of the room, her eyes closed, her face infested with tiny,

inexplicable tics.

She was talking again, or at least attempting to, and this time he knew, knew

without a shadow of a doubt that somehow Mamouljian was still with her.

He said her name, but she made no sign of waking. Getting up out of bed he

crossed the room toward her, but as he made his move the air around them seemed to

bleed darkness. Her chattering took on a more urgent pitch, and he sensed the darkness

solidifying. His face and chest began itch; his eyes stung.

Again he called her name, shouting now. There was no response. Shadows had

begun to flit across her, though there was no light in the room that could have cast

them. He stared at her gabbling face: the shadows resembled those cast by light

through blossom-laden boughs, as though she were standing in the shade of a tree.

Above him, something sighed. He looked up. The ceiling had disappeared. In

its place a spreading tracery of branches, growing even as he watched. Her words

were at its root, he had no doubt of it, and it grew stronger and more intricate

with every syllable she spoke. The boughs rippled as they swelled, sprouting twigs

that in seconds grew heavy with foliage. But despite its health, the tree was

corrupted in every bud. Its leaves were black, and shone not with sap but with the

sweat of putrescence. Vermin scuttled up and down the branches; fetid blossoms fell

like snow, leaving the fruit exposed.

Such terrible fruit! A sheaf of knives, tied up in a ribbon like a gift for

an assassin. A child's head hung up by its plaited hair. One branch was looped with

human intestine; from another a cage depended, in which a bird was burning alive.

Mementos all; keepsakes of past atrocities. And was the collector here, among his

souvenirs?

Something moved in the turbulent darkness above Marty, and it was no rat. He

could hear whispers exchanged. There were human beings up there, resting in the rot.

And they were climbing down to have him join them.

He reached through the boiling air and took hold of Carys' arm. It felt

mushy, as though the flesh was about to come away in his hand. Beneath her lids, she

rolled her eyes like a stage lunatic; her mouth still shaping the words that

conjured the tree.

"Stop," he said, but she only chattered on.

He took hold of her with both hands and shouted for her to shut up, shaking

her as he did so. Above them, the boughs creaked; a litter of twigs fell down on

him.

"Wake up, damn you," he told her. "Carys! This is Marty; me, Marty! Wake up,

for Christ's sake."

He felt something in his hair, and glanced up to see a woman spitting a

pearl-thread of saliva down upon him. It splattered on his face, ice-cold. Panic

mounting, he started to yell at Carys to make her stop, and when that failed he

slapped her hard across the face. For an instant the flow of conjuring was

interrupted. The tree and its inhabitants complained with growls. He slapped her

again, harder. The fever behind her lids had begun to abate, he saw. He called to

her again, and shook her. Her mouth lolled open; the tics and terrible

Page 417

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

intentionality left her face. The tree trembled.

"Please . . ." he begged her, "wake up."

The black leaves shrank upon themselves; the fevered limbs lost their

ambition.

She opened her eyes.

Murmuring its chagrin, the rot rotted and went away into nothingness.

The mark of his hand was still ripening on her cheek, but she was apparently

unaware of his blows. Her voice was blurred by sleep as she said:

"What's wrong?"

He held her tight, not having any answer he felt brave enough to voice. He

only said:

"You were dreaming."

She looked at him, puzzled. "I don't remember," she said; and then, becoming aware of his trembling hands: "What's happened?"

"A nightmare," he said.

"Why am I out of bed?"

"I was trying to wake you."

She stared at him. "I don't want to be woken," she said. "I'm tired enough

as it is." She disengaged herself. "I want to go back to bed."

He let her return to the crumpled sheets and lie down. She was asleep again

before he had crossed to her. He did not join her, but sat up until dawn, watching

her sleep, and trying to keep the memories at bay.

"I'm going back to the hotel," he told her in the middle of the next day; this very

day. He'd hoped she might have some explanation for the events of the previous

night-frail hope!-that she might tell him it was some stray illusion that she had

managed at last to spit out. But she had no such reassurances to offer. When he

asked her if she remembered anything of the preceding night she replied that she

dreamed nothing these nights, and was glad of it. Nothing. He repeated the word like

a death sentence, thinking of the empty room in Caliban Street; of how nothing was

the essence of his fear.

Seeing his distress, she reached across to him and touched his face.- His

skin was hot. It was raining outside, but the room was clammy.

"The European's dead," she told him.

"I have to see for myself."

"There's no need, babe."

"If he's dead and gone, why do you talk in your sleep?"

"Do I?"

"Talk; and make illusions."

"Maybe I'm writing a book," she said. The attempt at levity was stillborn.

"We've got plenty of problems without going back there."

That was true; there was much to decide. How to tell this story, for one;

and how to be believed for another. How to give themselves into the hands of the law

and not be accused of murders known and unknown. There was a fortune waiting for

Carys somewhere; she was her father's sole beneficiary. That too was a reality that

had to be faced.

"Mamoulia's dead," she told him. "Can't we forget about him for a while?

When they find the bodies we'll tell the whole story. But not yet. I want to rest

for a few days."

"You made something appear last night. Here, in this room. I saw it."

"Why are you so certain it's me?" she retorted. "Why should I be the one

who's still obsessed? Are you sure it isn't you who's keeping this alive?"

"Me?"

"Not able to let it go."

"Nothing would make me happier!"

"Then forget it, damn you! Let it be, Marty! He's gone. Dead and gone! And

that's the end of it!"

She left him to turn the accusation over in his head. Maybe it was him;

maybe he'd just dreamed the tree, and was blaming her for his own paranoia. But in

her absence his doubts conspired. How could he trust her? If the European was

alive-somehow, somewhere-couldn't he put those arguments into her mouth, to keep

Marty from interfering? He spent the time she was out in an agony of indecision, not

knowing a way forward that wasn't tainted with suspicion, but lacking the strength

to face the hotel again, and so prove the matter one way or the other.

Page 418

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

Then, in the late afternoon, she'd returned. They'd said nothing, or very

little, and after a while she'd gone back to bed, complaining of an aching head.

After half an hour sharing the room with her sleeping presence, hearing only her

even breath (no chatter this time), he'd gone out for whisky and a paper, scanning

it for news of discovery or pursuit. There was nothing. World events dominated;

where there were not cyclones or wars there were cartoons and racing results. He

headed back to the flat prepared to forget his doubts, to tell her that

she'd been

right all along, only to find the bedroom locked and from the inside
her

voice-softened by sleep-stumbling toward a new coherence.

He broke in and tried to wake her, but this time neither shaking nor
slaps

made any impression upon her possessed slumber.

74

And he was almost there now. He wasn't dressed for the cold that was
creeping on,

and he shivered as he crossed the desolation to the Hotel
Pandemonium. Autumn was

making its presence felt early this year, not even waiting for the
beginning of

September to chill the air. In the weeks since he'd last stood on this
spot the

summer had given in to rain and wind. He was not unhappy with its
desertion. Summer

heat in small rooms would never have benign associations for him
again.

He looked up at the hotel. It was coral-colored in the sliding light-the
details of scorch marks and graffiti looked almost too real. A portrait
by an

obsessive, each detail in absolute focus. He watched the facade
awhile, to see if

something signaled to him. Perhaps a window might wink, a door
grimace; anything to

prepare him for what he might discover inside. But it remained politic. Just a solid

building, face staled with age and flame, catching the last light of the day.

The front door had been closed by the last visitor to leave the hotel, but

no attempt had been made to replace the boards. Marty pushed, and the door opened,

grinding across the plaster and dirt on the floor. Inside, nothing had changed. The

chandelier tinkled as a gust from outside trespassed into the sanctum; a dry rain of

dust flitted down.

As he climbed the first two flights, a smell began to infiltrate; something

riper than damp or ash. Presumably the bodies would still be where they'd been left.

Substantial decay would have set in. He didn't know how long such processes took,

but after the experiences of recent weeks he was prepared for the worst; even the

strengthening smell as he ascended scarcely touched him.

He halted halfway up and took out the bottle of Scotch he'd bought,

unscrewed the top, and, still eyeing the remaining flights of stairs, put the bottle

to his lips. The mouthful of spirits sluiced his gums and throat, and scorched its

way down into his belly. He resisted the temptation to take a second

swig. Instead,

he resealed the bottle and pocketed it before continuing up.

Memories began to besiege him. He'd hoped to keep them at bay, but they came

unbidden, and he wasn't strong enough to resist them. There were no pictures, just

voices. They echoed around his skull as if it were empty, as if he were simply some

mindless brute answering the call of a superior mind. The urge to turn tail and run

came over him, but he knew that if he capitulated now, and went back to her, the

qualms would only deepen. Soon he'd be suspecting every twitch of her arm, wondering

if the European was preparing her for murder. It would be another kind of prison:

its walls suspicion, its bars doubt, and he'd be sentenced to it for the rest of his

life. Even if Carys left, wouldn't he still be glancing over his shoulder as the

years passed, watching for a someone to appear who had a face behind his face, and

the European's unforgiving eyes?

And still, with every step taken, his fears multiplied. He gripped the

filthy banister, and forced himself onward and upward. I don't want to go, the child

in him complained. Don't make me go, please. Easy enough to turn around, easy enough

to delay the whole thing. Look! Your feet will do it, just say the word. Go back!

She'll wake eventually; just be patient. Go back!

And if she doesn't wake? the voice of reason replied. And that made him go

on.

As he took another step, something moved on the landing ahead of him. A

flea-jump noise, no more; so soft he could barely hear it. A rat, perhaps? Probably.

All manner of scavengers would come here, wouldn't they, in the expectation of a

feast. He'd preempted that horror too, and was hardened to the thought.

He reached the landing. No rats scurried away from his footfall, at least he

saw none. But there was something here. At the head of the stairs a small brown

Page 419

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

maggot rolled around on the carpet, twisting upon itself in its enthusiasm to get

somewhere. Down the stairs probably: into the dark. He didn't look at it too

closely. Whatever it was, it was harmless. Let it find a niche to grow fat in, and

become a fly in time, if that was its ambition.

He crossed the penultimate landing and started up the final flight of stairs. A few steps up, the smell abruptly worsened. The stench of fetid meat

assaulted him, and now, despite the Scotch and all the mental preparation, his

innards turned over and over; like the maggot on the carpet, twisting and turning.

He stopped two or three steps up the flight, pulled out his whisky, and took

two solid throatfuls, swallowing it so quickly it made his eyes water. Then he

continued his ascent. Something soft slid beneath his heel. He looked down. Another

maggot, the larger brother of the one below, had been arrested in its descent by his

foot: it was squashed to a fatty pulp. He glanced at it for only a second before

hurrying on, aware that the sole of his shoe was slimy; either that or he was

pressing other such grubs underfoot as he went.

The gulps of liquor had made his head sing; he took the last two dozen steps

almost at a run, eager to have the worst over with. By the time he'd reached the top

of the stairs, he was breathless. He had an absurd image of himself, a drunkard's

fancy, as a messenger coming with news-lost battles, murdered children-to the palace

of some fabulous king. Except that the king too was murdered, his battles lost.

He started toward the penthouse; the smell had become so dense it was almost

edible. As he had once before, he caught sight of himself in the mirror; he looked

down, ashamed, from the frightened face and-God!-the carpet crawled. Not two or

three but a dozen or more fat, ragged maggots were laboring, blindly it seemed, to

find their way across the carpet, which was stained by their travels. They were like

no insect he'd ever seen before, lacking any decipherable anatomy, and all different

sizes: some finger-thin, others the size of a baby's fist, their shapeless forms

purple, but streaked with yellow. They left trails of slime and blood like wounded

slugs. He stepped around them. They'd got fat on meat he'd once debated with. He

didn't want to examine them too closely.

But as he pushed open the door of the suite, and stepped, cautiously, into

the corridor, an appalling possibility crept into his head and sat there, whispering

obscenities. The creatures were everywhere in the suite. The more ambitious of them

were scaling the pastel walls, gluing the slivers of their bodies to the wallpaper

with seeped fluids, edging up like caterpillars, a peristalsis moving through their

length. Their direction was arbitrary; some, to judge by their trails, were circling

on themselves.

In the dim light of the corridor his worst suspicions merely simmered; but

they began to boil when he edged past Whitehead's sprawled body and stepped into the

slaughterhouse room, where the light from the highway made a sodium day. Here the

creatures were in yet greater abundance. The whole room swarmed with them, from

flea-sized fragments to slabs the size of a man's heart, throwing out tattered

filaments like tentacles to haul themselves about. Worms, fleas, maggots-a whole new

entymology congregated at the place of execution.

Except that these weren't insects, or the larvae of insects: he could see

that plainly now. They were pieces of the European's flesh. He was still alive. In

pieces, in a thousand senseless pieces, but alive.

Breer had been unrelentingly thorough in his destruction, eradicating the

European as best his machete and failing hands would allow. But it had not been

enough. There was too much stolen life buzzing in Mamoulia's cells; it roared on,

in contravention of any sane law, unquenchable.

For all his vehemence the Razor-Eater had not finished the European's life,

merely subdivided it, leaving it to describe these futile circles. And somewhere in

this lunatic's menagerie was a beast with a will, a fragment that still possessed

sufficient sense to think itself-albeit stutteringly-into Carys' mind. Perhaps not

one piece, perhaps many-a sum of these wandering parts. Marty wasn't interested in

its biology. How this obscenity survived was a matter for a madhouse debating

society.

He backed out of the room and stood, shivering in the hall. Wind gusted

against the window; the glass complained. He listened to the gusts while he worked

out what to do next. Down the corridor a piece of filth fell from the wall. He

watched it struggle to turn itself over, and then begin the slow ascent again. Just

beyond the spot where it labored lay Whitehead. Marty went back to the body.

Charmaine's killers had enjoyed themselves mightily before they left:

Page 420

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

Whitehead's trousers and underwear had been pulled down, and his groin scrawled on

with a knife. His eyes were open; his false teeth had been removed. He stared at

Marty, jaw sagging like a delinquent child. Flies crawled on him; there were patches

of decay on his face. But he was dead: which in this world was something. The boys

had, as a final insult, defecated on his chest. Flies gathered there too.

In his time Marty had hated this man; loved him too, if only for a day;

called him Papa, called him bastard; made love to his daughter and thought himself

King of Creation. He'd seen the man in power: a lord. Seen him afraid too:

scrabbling for escape like a rat in a fire. He'd seen the old man's odd species of

integrity in practice, and found it workable. As fruitful, perhaps, as the

affections of more loving men.

He reached across to seal off the stare, but in their zeal the evangelists

had cut off Whitehead's lids, and Marty's fingers instead touched the slick of his

eyeball. Not tears that wetted it, but rot. He grimaced; withdrew his hand,

sickened.

Just to shut off the look on Papa's face he thrust his fingers under the corpse to heave it onto its belly. The body fluids had settled, and his

underside

was damp and sticky. Gritting his teeth he rolled the man's bulk onto its side, and

let gravity pull it over. Now at least the old man didn't have to watch what

followed.

Marty stood up. His hands stank. He baptized them liberally with the rest of

the Scotch, to cancel the smell. The libation served another purpose: it removed the

temptation of the drink. It would be too easy to become muzzy and lose focus on the

problem. The enemy was here. It had to be dealt with; put away forever.

He began where he was, in the hall, digging his heels into the pieces of

flesh that crawled around Whitehead's body, squashing their stolen life out as best

he could. They made no sound, of course, which made the task simpler. They were just

worms, he told himself, dumb slivers of mindless life. And it became yet easier as

he went up and down the corridor grinding the meat into smears of yellow fat and

brown muscle. The beasts succumbed without argument. He began to sweat, working out

his revulsion on this human refuse, eyes darting everywhere to make sure he caught

each wretched scrap. He felt a smile twitch at the corners of his mouth-now a low

laugh, quite without humor, escaped. It was an easy decimation. He was a boy again,

killing ants with his thumbs. One! Two! Three! Only these things were slower than

the most laden ant, and he could stamp them down at a leisurely pace. All the power

and wisdom of the European had come to this muck, and he-Marty Strauss-had been

elected to play the God-game, and wipe it away. He had gained, at the last, a

terrible authority.

Nothing is essential. The words he'd heard-and spoken-in Caliban Street at

last made absolute sense. Here was the European, proving the bitter syllogism with

his own flesh and bone.

When he'd finished his work in the hallway he returned to the main room and

began his labors there, his initial revulsion at touching the flesh dwindling, until

with time he was snatching pieces from their perches on the wall and flinging them

down to be ground out. When he'd done in the gaming room he went to scour the

landing and stairs. Finally, when all was still, he returned to the suite and made a

bonfire of the curtains from the dressing room, fueled by the table the old man had

played cards on, and tinderred by the cards themselves, and then went around the room

kicking the larger pieces of flesh into the fire, where they spat and curled and

were presently consumed. The smaller pieces he scraped up, the laugh still coming

intermittently as he flung little rains of meat into the middle of the conflagration. The room rapidly filled with smoke and heat, neither having any

escape route. His heart began to pound loudly in his ears; his arms shone with

sweat. It was a long job, and he had to be meticulous, didn't he? He mustn't leave a

living speck, not a fragment, for fear it live on, become mythical-grow perhaps-and

find him.

When the fire died down he fed it the pillows, the records and the paperback

books until there was nothing left to burn but himself. There were moments, as he

gazed entranced into the flames, that the thought of stepping into the fire was not

unattractive. But he resisted. It was only exhaustion tempting him. Instead he

crouched in a corner, watching the play of flame-light on the wall. The patterns

made him cry; or at least something did.

When, some time before dawn, Carys came up the stairs to claim him from his reverie,

Page 421

Barker, Clive - Coldheart Canyon

he neither heard nor saw her. The fire had long since died down. Only the bones,

shattered by Breer's dismembering, and blackened and cracked in the fire, were still

recognizable. Shards of thighbone, of vertebrae; the saucer of the European's skull.

She crept in as if fearful of waking a sleeping child. Maybe he had been

sleeping. There were feathery images in his head that could only have been dreams:

life was not that terrible.

"I woke," she said. "I knew you'd be here."

He could barely see her through the grimy air; she was a chalk drawing on

black paper: so vulnerable to smudging. The tears came again when he thought of

that.

"We must go," she said, not wishing to press him for explanations. Perhaps

she would ask him in time, when the plaintive look had left his eyes; perhaps she

would never ask. After several minutes of her coaxing him and

pressing close to him,

he slid up from his knee-hugging meditation and conceded to her care.

When they stepped out of the hotel the wind buffeted them, as antagonistic

as ever. Marty looked up to see if the gusts had blown the stars off course, but

they were steadfast. Everything was in its place, despite the insanity that had

mauled their lives of late, and though she hurried him on, he dawdled, his head

back, squinting at the stars. There were no revelations to be had there. Just

pinpricks of light in a plain heaven. But he saw for the first time how fine that

was. That in a world too full of loss and rage they be remote: the minimum of glory.

As she led him across the lightless ground, time and again he could not prevent his

gaze from straying skyward.